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Cover by Sandrine Gestin
"L'attente"

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June 2004

Summer is finally here (at least in our part of the world), and we all know what that means! It's time for the Lamp Post Awards. The staff at Deep Magic has combed through all the stories, articles, and cover art from the past year of Deep Magic and provided you, our readers, a list of nominees. Now it's up to you to vote for your favorites. We're going to do it a little differently this year. You will be asked to pick your three favorite Fantasy short stories, your two favorite Science Fiction short stories, and your single favorite article and cover. Voting will continue through August 15th, 2004, and the winners will be announced in the September issue of Deep Magic. Go to our website to place your votes.

This month brings an end to *Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay* by Keri Stevenson. It's been a fun ride over the last few months, so be sure not to miss this final installment. We also offer three fantastic short stories: *The Saintly Fianche of Malitane* by Amy Butler follows Lady Ciara as she seeks a family relic from an unwilling ghost; *In Harm's Way* by Michael Graves tells the tragic tale of two friends caught on opposite sides of a deadly battle; *Hunting with Flinteye* by Sean T.M. Stiennon takes us for a ride with Jalazar Flinteye, bodyguard-for-hire. We know you will enjoy these stories as much as we all did.

M. Thomas is back in this issue with a new article, *Notes On Beginnings: Stay With Scudder*, a must for all those struggling with the first few pages of a story. And don't miss Jeff Wheeler's *Show and Tell*, an article dealing with a topic every author struggles with. Sandrine Gestin is our featured artist this month; her piece entitled *L'attente* is featured on the June cover.

Last month's writing challenge was another success (we asked you to reinvent the traditional Ranger for our Kenatos world-building project), and a winner is announced on page five. We also included a few other entries for your enjoyment. Don't forget to take part in the next challenge!

One final reminder that we're still looking for Children's stories for our August issue (we need them in the next few weeks) and scary stories for our October issue.

Thank you for downloading the June issue. Please visit our forums and let us know how you like it!

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

It's hard to believe it's that time of year again, but sure enough, we're ready to begin voting for the Lamp Post Awards. Each year, we ask you, our readers, to vote for your favorite Fantasy short, Science Fiction short, Article, and Cover Art from a list of nominees, chosen from our panel of editors.

We've featured some great stories, articles, and cover artists this past year (our years, by the way, run from June through the following May). It was a tough decision just coming up with the nominees. Choosing the best will be even more difficult. Of course, that's why we're asking for your help. Below you will see a list of the nominees. If you haven't read them all, feel free to download the appropriate issue and read them (next to each nominee is the corresponding issue). You have all summer. Voting will close on August 15, 2004, with the winners to be announced in the September issue.

If you have any questions, feel free to stop by the forums and let us know. We also welcome you to join or start a discussion about the Lamp Post awards while you're there.

Click Here to Vote!

Science Fiction Short Stories

Swarm by A.J. Thompson (August 2003)
Cohesion Lost by Darrell Newton (March 2004)
Where Memory Has Lease by Mark Reeder (April 2004)
A Taste of Time by Abby Goldsmith (May 2004)
Our Own Personal Gaia by Alexander R. Brown (June 2003)
The Interstellar Public Health Inspector by Nigel Atkinson (May 2004)

Fantasy Short Stories

A Hero by Any Other Name by Wade Albert White (January 2004)
A Winter Stew by M. Thomas (October 2003)
Into Pohjola by Scott Clements (October 2003)
Kenatos by Jeff Wheeler (April 2004)
Limbo the Black-Souled by Steve Poling (January 2004)
Spells End by Mark C. Ford (August 2003)
The Archer and the Dove by Bret Ludwig (May 2004)
The Garden of Lost Dreams by Lynn-Marie Braley (November 2003)
The Lost Colony of Arob Arot by A.M. Stickel (November 2003)
The Well That Never Ended by Usman Tanveer Malik (April 2004)

Covers

August by Jeff Bedrick (August 2003)
Bitter Chivalry by Todd Lockwood (December 2003)
Evening Duty by Rob Katkowski (October 2003)
Exiles by Peter Kudriashov (September 2003)
Warrior's Bond by Matthew Stawicki (February 2004)

Articles

New York Field Trip (1 and 2) by Jeff Wheeler (July 2003/August 2003)
Notes On the Hero by M. Thomas (June 2003)
Peas and Carrots by Brendon Taylor (October 2003)
The Geek In Me by Jeremy Whitted (June 2003)
To Outline, Or Not to Outline? by Kristen Britain (September 2003)
Vocabulary by Cecilia Dart-Thornton (January 2004)

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

June 2004 Writing Challenge

Now Kenatos has a start to its bestiary and we have seen a glimpse of its ranger class, perhaps we should attend to another fine detail to the fabric of a fantasy world: Legends and tall tales. Not all great heroes live in the age a story is told, and those who have gone on before leave their marks on those who follow. At least one of the Editors of Deep Magic enjoys Robert Jordan's detailed past that arises in his present. Jain Farstrider and the Dragons of the past live again through the lives of Rand, Matt, Perrin, and the other protagonists in the Wheel of Time. The challenge this month is to create a legend about a mythical hero who once strode across the land of Kenatos. Perhaps, like St. Patrick, he drove the snakes from the land. Or maybe, like Paul Bunyan, he cleared the land of trees with the help of a bluish beast of burden. Write your tall tale set in Kenatos in 1000 words or less. We look forward to meeting your fictional-historical-larger-than-life-creations.

Selections from the May 2004 Writing Challenge

The Top Selection from the May Challenge:

Finding Lewin

Other Entries:

Darkly Silver Dialogues
Drifter
Tresllar

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

One of the staples of high fantasy is the archetypal profession of Ranger. Though called by many names in the genre (Tolkien was the first to call them Rangers, or Dunedain, Dungeons & Dragons still uses Ranger as a character class, Terry Brooks calls his Trackers, and even Greg Keyes re-invented the concept with a Holter named Aspar White in his book 'The Briar King'), the concept is the same–reclusive foresters skilled at surviving and following the trail of footprints left by others. The writing challenge this month is to re-invent this archetype again for the World of Kenatos. Give them a unique name, a reputation, and special abilities. Create a story about one dealing with the wilds of the World of Kenatos. We will publish the best entries in Deep Magic and have the readers vote for their favorite, the best of the best, that will be used in Kenatos in the future.

Finding Lewin

By Matthew Dunn

Edmer saw the man enter the tavern, and he knew. He had lived this encounter untold times before, and invariably would again after. The man was balding and his body, though muscled, had begun running towards the infuriating pudginess of the village dwellers. A different man, a different job, but always the same. Edmer stifled a grunt with a sigh. The chubby man's eyes scanned the room, left to right and back again, like someone who knew what he was looking for, but hadn't the faintest idea what it actually looked like. He kept turning his hat in his hands and had a dance in his step that spoke of indecisive urgency. His eyes did not find what they desired; his shoulders slumped a hair, and he gingerly approached the tavern owner. Spoon to lips, Edmer sipped his stew from the shadows and let out an amused grunt. He knew. The bartender would point in his direction, and the villager would approach him. It would mean work, some minor coin, but it would be work, putting up with the man.

The bartender pointed to Edmer, and the chubby man looked nervously at him through the smoky room.

But when the man approached, his nerve failed him. He stood, a pace from Edmer's table, unsure how to proceed but unable to quit. His eyes pleaded. Edmer sipped his stew. Well, if it meant coin, there was no need to be rude, he thought. His longbow and short sword sat at the table's only other chair, silent and threatening; he gathered them up and motioned to the now vacant chair. "Sit," he said, not unkindly, if curtly.

At the sound of Edmer's voice, the man started. He scraped the wooden chair back a touch, and perched on the seat's edge, his hat still held in front of him, spinning slowly in his hands. "Are you- I need- are you the Finder?" he asked.

Oh my. One of *those* villagers. Sometimes they at least tried to pronounce the true name, though rarely correctly. Edmer stifled a sigh with a grunt. "A," he replied. The man recoiled, almost as unsure of the answer as the company. "A Finder, not The. Yes. I am a Fyündular, a Finder." The origins of the name were old and mostly forgotten, but several rumors persisted. One of them, the one that Edmer believed, purported that it was a High Druidic term meaning, 'To follow the path of the land' or 'To find the path'. Yes, that was the one he preferred. To the man, he continued, "Sit back. I won't bite. You come for aid, no? Yes, tell me what you require, and what you offer." Not exactly the formal opening, but in this backwoods village, who would know? Who would care? Edmer longed to be back outdoors, but, just now, he needed the coin.

"It's my son, we need to go. We can't find him, he's been missing since 'fore midday. I thought maybe he lost track of the daylight, but not this late. He's never been this late. Gertie sent me to fetch help, so I came looking for a Finder. I can't say as she'd approve—she considers the Finders bad luck—but help is help, and we need a Finder," the man said in one almost frantic breath. His eyes said more, without breath. Edmer considered. It would be a simple job then, perhaps more interesting than he expected, but simple nonetheless. Burghundary was barely worth calling a town, little more than a village. But it anchored the surrounding farms to one another and to the world outside. The nearest town of any size was Stonehollow, three days' ride to the north. The boy could have tired of this backwater life and set off for the city. He wouldn't have been the first, or even the hundredth. Or, he could have fallen in a well. This area was hardly a haven for much more mischief than that. Possibly a traveling merchant

accosted him. Or, he could have fallen in a well. Edmer grunted.

"When was your boy last seen, and how old is he," he asked.

"The man pulled the chair up behind him, and leaned closer. "In our north field, this morning. He had been chopping wood, but Gertie sent him to check on the sheep. The pasture's in the next valley past a rise, and they'd been making an awful racket. He went up over the rise, stopped on top, and ran down t'other side. Gertie says the sheep stopped just then, and when Lewin - that's my son's name, Lewin—when Lewin didn't come back, she went after 'im. When she got to the rise, he weren't there. I was in town at the time, buyin' up some more milled flour, for the baking, you know. But that's what Gertie says happened. He's in his thirteenth summer this year—old enough to know better'n to run off without telling us, and too young to be runnin' off for a big city or like mischief," the man said, almost mirroring the Finder's thoughts.

Edmer considered this. Probably fell in a well, he thought. He eyed the man before him. Lewin's father was wearing simple clothing – farmer's garb. He wore no jewelry, his boots were old, and his coveralls patched. It would be very minor coin. But, the request had been made and formalities begun. "What do you offer?"

"Oh," he said, flustered. "I, err, well, Gertie makes a lamb pie to tell yer mum about. Or, well, I suppose... I'm sorry, sir, but we have little belongings to speak of, but if you help us find my son, it would all be yours to choose from." The man slumped into the chair, the hope in his eyes dying with the dance in his legs. His hands dropped to his lap; the hat lay still, forgotten. But something he had said caught Edmer's attention. Something different.

"What is your name, father of Lewin," Edmer asked, gently.

The man looked up, defeated. "Damarr," he said.

"Damarr, tell me something. This may be nothing, but what did you mean when you said 'my son'?"

His hopes revived ever so slightly, Damarr perked up. He replied, "Well, Lewin's mum, that was my first wife, Goldie. She died a few summers back, caught a strange wasting disease. Terrible, that was. Gertie's her sister. I took her as wife the following winter. The chores needed doing, the house needed keeping, and she needed a man. She had been real helpful when Goldie was sick, and she stayed on after. So, Lewin's mine, but not hers. He's her nephew. Err, she's his aunt. Well..."

The formalities had been addressed, the offer made. Edmer disliked taking jobs, especially from small villagers, but for some reason Damarr intrigued him. Besides, right now he needed the coin. That stew, and the supplies purchased earlier that day had consumed his last. "Yes, well," Edmer said, standing, "We won't find Lewin sitting here, will we?"

It had been some time since he had been asked to find a missing person. The last several jobs he had taken were miniscule, wandered off sheep, murdered cattle – trivial matters to solve. They always were in these backwater areas. When he stayed closer to the larger cities, the more interesting jobs found him, tracking this monster or that beast. My wife has been kidnapped by a band of Black Druids, or murderous thieves. My daughter has run off with a mad Wizard; bring her back without getting anyone turned into a salt pillar. Edmer had grown tired of counting sheep, and there was something in Damarr's eyes that suggested Lewin had *not* fallen down a well. He turned and strode through the ill-lit tavern, knowing Damarr would fall out of his seat in the rush of thanking him while leaving. Behind him, he heard the crash of the chair onto the floor.

The Fyündular was on the hunt.

* * *

"Is it true what they say about Finders?" Damarr asked, leading the way to his farm like a dog leading townfolk to a boy who had fallen in a well.

Edmer strode alongside him, his distaste at hiring himself out being replaced with interest for the man. Though he seldom admitted it, even to himself, he knew this part of the dance as well. Edmer disliked people. Most Fyündular did; it was the reason they eschewed city life for the wilds. In the forest, Edmer could live comfortably, without human contact and without hunger, for weeks at a time, relying on his woodcraft and hunting skills to get by. But periodically he needed to purchase supplies, and that required coin. Coin required work, jobs. And so the Fyündular turned their prowess and predilection into profession. Their knowledge of the wilds of Kenatos was surpassed by none, save possibly the Druid Elders and the Elves. But despite his contempt for people, deep down, he craved their company. And having rejoined the company of men after a moon phase alone with his thoughts, he thought maybe they weren't all as miserable as he remembered them. This stage of jobs was often hardest - not the tracking, but the reintegrating. The war within himself, between despising the necessity of interaction and his own desire for that interaction, was never simple. Neither was the reconciliation of his disgruntled persona with the vacuous cheerfulness of the villagers. How did people with so few assets and so many unending travails always remain so happy, while Edmer - adept at innumerable skills, knowledgeable above all measures but those of his trade, and unencumbered with the trappings of the sedentary - remained unfulfilled. How could he simultaneously disdain this man whose son is missing, yet be intrigued by his dilemma, his outlook, his life? Betraying none of his inner turmoil, Edmer replied, "And what is it that they say about us?"

Damarr had turned from him, and now walked facing forward, his head downcast, shamed. "I—I shouldn't say. I met one once before when he came to our aid. That was just before I lost my Goldie, that was. But he didn't say much. Less than you, even." He tried eyeing Edmer sideways, without turning his head. The farmer was trying to be discrete; he was failing. The Finder grunted. After a few paces, Damarr resumed, dry-washing his hands, "They say that Finders are enchanted. That your Gods give you powers. And that you apprentice with Druids. And wizards. And scholars. I've heard it said that your kind've taken your own *carnotha*, that you're thieves." Then, casting worried glances into the night, he made a gesture with his hands, one hand flat, palm up, with the other resting in it, fingers wriggling toward the sky like flames as he half whispered "They even say the Finders are from the same stock as," he glanced around once more, "*them*."

The Fyündular watched this, amused. "*Them*," he said.

"You know the ones. This close to Stonehollow, most folk daren't mention them, lest they're not all wiped out, but you know the ones I mean. Them of the fire." Then, as if realizing too late the rumors might even be true, Damarr's hand shot to his mouth, sad eyes widening to saucers, and he edged away from Edmer in fear.

"Calm yourself. I have no fire in my blood. Merely bile," Edmer said. Wizards? Druids, thieves, *the Firebrand*? Would the rumors never end? Although, as he considered, some of those stories were not as far-fetched as they first sounded. He and his compatriots did commune with Nature in a way almost akin to the Druids' Bond. He'd heard that they could speak to the very trees and animals in the forests. That was a skill beyond the Fyündular, but they could open their minds to the *feel* of the land. The flow of the waters, the contours of the hills, the health of the wildlife, these things could be gleaned with little more than concentration and an open

mind. He supposed to some the mystery of it would appear a Druid thing. But the Firebrand? No, those powers he did not possess. But then, though he couldn't summon flames at will to his hands, he had heard the Vision being described as Fire-eye as often as Cat-eye. It never ceased to amuse Edmer that those abilities that he had long since considered urbane and could perform by rote others found to be so much magic. He wondered if it was the same with wizards.

They walked on in silence for the remainder of the short journey, always with Damarr nervously staying a half-pace ahead, urging the Fyündular forward ever faster and Edmer staying back, approaching the homestead with calm certainty. If the boy could be found, Edmer would find him. Whether it would take days of tracking the faintest clues through the countryside or merely checking the bottom of a well, he would find the boy. He knew.

When they at last arrived at Damarr's farm, the moon was high in the night sky, casting a colorless light from a mottled canvas. Damarr ran the last dozen paces to the farmhouse calling to Gertie for news on Lewin, yet Edmer held back, casually inspecting the fence leading to the door. One rumor that persisted of the Fyündular was that of a secret language, known only to them; he was surprised Damarr had not mentioned it on the walk from the tavern. That one was true. One of the quirks of their loose brotherhood was a common desire to waste as little time as possible on fruitless pursuits or frivolous people. To that end, the Finders had developed a method of rating the quality of tasks and level of tolerability of their various employers. A simple pattern of innocuous nicks and scratches in a fence beam or nearby tree, always located on the second nearest target to the left of the main entrance, could advise any Fyündular yet to come of the nature of the residents. There was one such message on Damarr's fence, scratched hastily by one of Edmer's comrades. Seen by any other eye, it appeared no different than normal weather-wear or contact scratches; the code remained unnoticed. But to Edmer, the short message told him quite an interesting tale. Quite interesting.

Without pausing his sweeping gaze on the fence overlong, Edmer took in the tale of the previous Fyündular to aid Damarr's household, and then continued to survey the lay of the property almost casually. Satisfied that his research passed as unnoticed as the message, he resumed the walk to the simple home. At the threshold he paused. A minor suspicion told him to stand on formality now, though he had skipped it in the tavern. He waited for the customary invitation. Within, Damarr appeared to be losing a hushed argument with a waifish, though obviously pregnant, woman in bedclothes. She was barking comments at him in subdued tones while furiously throwing logs into the hearth, which was already burning with a disturbingly large fire. Something about her body language tugged at Edmer, though he couldn't place it, something was off. Damarr pleaded with her, oblivious to any anomaly. In less subdued tones, she stomped one bare foot on the floor and said, "I won't! Get rid of him," before storming out of the main room through a door in the back. Damarr, confused, wandered towards the front door, his hat back in his hands. "I'm not sure that went well," he said. "That was Gertie. Lewin still hasn't returned, but she seems sure he'll come back of his own tomorrow. She's not willing to pay to hire a Fyoon-, a Fun-, a Finder. I am sorry. I believe I've wasted both our time tonight. Perhaps it would be best if you went on your way. I- I'm sure she's right. Lewin *has* to return tomorrow. I'm sure," he said, not sounding sure at all.

Edmer took this in with little show of surprise or frustration. In fact, he almost felt sorry for Damarr. But his interest had been piqued by this case, and the message on the fence only deepened that interest. And, despite having known the man for little more than an hour, Edmer was warming up to the man's simple honesty. He found himself once again questioning his own stalwart rejection of human company. So, he was progressing through the stages quickly

this time. But, this job felt different, he was beginning to genuinely like Damarr. "Perhaps if I remain nearby for tonight, and see if I can find any sign of his path, we can speak again tomorrow. If he doesn't return of his own, that is," Edmer offered.

They said little more; the decision had been made, and not by them. They parted ways at the door, and Edmer left with his thoughts, wandering the grounds of the homestead. A passing bank of clouds blocked the moon, and the well-lit night turned dark. Edmer paused in his steps, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply. When he opened his eyes once more, they glowed a vibrant yellow. The Cat's-eye. Like the wild cats of Kenatos, the Fyündular could gather the minimal light of the dark night and channel it. In just the dimmest of light, a skilled Finder could see as well as the brightest of days. It was a simple trick of concentration and attunement to Nature, much like the quasi-Bond they used. Any man could do it, if they cared to learn, but few outside of the Fyündular even knew of the trick's existence. His view of the land restored, Edmer continued on his way. He headed first for the north field.

* * *

It would be weeks yet before the baby started kicking, but still Gertie couldn't sleep through the night. It seemed that as the days wore on, she had to make water more and more. She got out of the bed that she and her Damarr slept in, the bed that her baby had been made in, and walked gingerly to the outhouse, keeping one protective hand on her belly and the other stretched out to find the nearest wall. After she finished, she paused on the walk back to the house and looked north. A warm glow of contentment enveloped her. From now on, Damarr would be hers alone. Hers, and her baby's. As Gertie turned to start back again, something caught her eye. Two bright pinpricks of light sat at the rise leading to the sheep pasture, immobile. She felt as though they were two evil eyes, staring at her, judging. For several long seconds she stood there, transfixed, unable to look away. The lights never moved. The contentment drained from her and was replaced by a horrible, horrible guilt and foreboding. Unnerved, she returned to her bed massaging her belly. She slept little, and only fitfully, the rest of the night, but could not convince herself it was the baby growing inside her keeping her awake.

* * *

Edmer awoke with the dawn. Before bedding down for the night on a spongy cushion of pine needles, he had inspected both the sheep pasture and the north field at length. The first thing he looked for were unmarked or disused wells. What he found instead was more alarming, if not surprising. So, the Fyündular had to admit to himself, he had been wrong. Lewin had definitely not just fallen in a well; he likely had been killed.

The ground of both fields was well trodden, both by human feet and sheep hooves. But with his practiced eye, Edmer was able to retrace the events of the day before with reasonable certainty. One set of tracks mapped a meandering, disorganized path, likely Damarr searching out his son after returning from the store. He found it both interesting and quite telling that there was no similar set from Gertie. No, her set was quite organized. It let straight from the house to the barn, and from the barn to a woodpile behind the barn, which lay with a cord of uncut wood in disarray awaiting the axe, which was curiously absent. Oddly, there was no matching set of Gertie's tracks leading *from* the woodpile, just a single shallow groove through

the grass, poorly roughed over, leading – as Edmer feared – to a well. From there, her tracks led back to the barn, and presumably back to the house. But he did notice tracks indicating several trips from the house to the woodpile. This bothered him because they led not to the stack of chopped wood outside the door as he would have expected, but directly *into* the house.

Edmer was savvy enough to realize there had been no disturbance with the sheep for Lewin to inspect. The motley pattern of tiny dark spots dappling the woodpile told him as much as the missing axe. After finding these things and deducing the likely course of events of the day, Edmer sat for some time on the woodpile, considering the life of his new friend. His musings were only disturbed once, when the woman took a trip to the outhouse. He'd be damned if she didn't look smug. That was when Gertie's odd body language in front of the hearth earlier revealed itself to him. She was concealing the wood from Damarr. She had been discreetly attempting to shield his view of the wood with her body, and she had been piling the wood into an already overbuilt fire. So that explained the trips to the woodpile from the house. It was then that the Finder made his bed and settled in for the night, his heart heavy.

Now, in the light of day, Edmer could no longer leave Damarr to the machinations of his wife. He attached his shortsword to his belt for quick access, and approached the house. Gertie answered when he knocked. She was all smiles and kindness, and invited him in. Damarr sat at the table, fully dressed and throwing a small breakfast down his throat. Between gulps, he was saying, "- get another quick search in before I start my morning chores. Ah! Finder! Did you have a look around last night? Any news of where he might've gone?"

Edmer stayed at the door, back to the wall and eyes on Damarr, but he never let Gertie out of his site. She had resumed chopping onions at the table, with a very large knife. Again she smiled at him. "Can I get you some water?" she asked.

"If you drew it from the well by the barn, I think I'll pass," he said. She froze, the knife halfway through an onion.

Damarr seemed confused. "What's wrong with the well? Did some animal fall-," he froze as well, understanding sinking in. "No. NO! Lewin couldn't have fallen in! That well's not so deep as we wouldn't have heard his calls for help. He couldn't have. Besides, how could he have gotten to the well from the sheep pasture? Gertie, tell him how-," and again he stopped. Damarr stood while stepping back, knocking the simple chair over, unnoticed. Complete and utter understanding spread across his face in one horrible flush. "You- you didn't. Gertie, tell me you didn't. Oh, Gods Gertie, tell me you didn't!" he shouted.

She tried shrugging it off, smiling, and returned to her onion. "Didn't what, Damarr? Nonsense. Why would I have killed Goldie's boy while he was chopping wood and dropped him in that old well? It's nonsense," she said, cutting more quickly now, more sloppily. She was putting on a brave show, but to Edmer it was no more convincing than the hand-puppet shows he had seen as a boy. Soon to be just as violent, but just as easy to see past, he thought. She continued the charade, her eyes tearing, "It's just nonsense, Damarr, why would I want to get rid of that little pest just before the baby comes, when we'll need his help the most? No, that's just silly."

"Pest? You're calling my boy, my son, my Lewin, a pest?" he replied, indignant. "How dare you! After what I did for you, took you in, gave you a home, a family! He was my boy, my only connection to my Goldie! How could you!"

She moved away from the table, the onion forgotten and stalked closer to Damarr, wielding the knife in front of her like a candle in the dark. "Damarr dear, surely you have to see. He was part of the past. He just distracted you. He looked so much like my trollop sister it made me sick. After all I went through to get rid of her, to get you for myself, his very face mocked me

daily. I had to stop it. I had to make sure our baby would be loved. Loved like he deserves. I know you're going to love our baby so much more than that little harpy's get. Now that they're out of the way, it's just us. You and me and the baby. We'll be such a happy family now. Aren't you happy?"

Damarr was backing away, disgusted. "Gods, woman! Happy? You're sick! You devil-thing! You killed my boy!" Edmer had watched this display, worried, and now the time had come to step in. He moved from the door with lightning speed and placed himself in front of Damarr, facing the woman. "Gertie, put down the knife. Put it down," he said.

Her smiling, pleading face dissolved into a mask of hideous wrath. Curses and vileness from a thousand witches seemed to well up in a frothing broth of hatred toward the Finder. "You," she spat. "I knew your lot were evil! If you hadn't come, he never would have been poisoned against me. Against my baby! Yrrahh!" She leapt at him, screaming incoherently and thrusting the knife. But in her haste, she stumbled on the over-turned chair and fell to the floor, the knife skittering away. Edmer wasted no time, drawing a length of cord from his belt pouch and tying her hands together behind her back. Behind him, Damarr had slumped to the floor and was sobbing miserably.

* * *

Later, after, Edmer walked Damarr back to his farm from the constable's in the village. After a delicate meeting between the Fyündular, the constable, Damarr, and a midwife, it was decided that Gertie would be kept in custody locally, under the care of a midwife until the child was born. Then she would be sent to Stonehollow for justice. Damarr still seemed in shock.

When they finally got back to the farm, Damarr asked, "What do you think she meant, Finder, when she said that she got rid of Goldie, too?"

Edmer stood at the fence, in front of the very answer to that question, and couldn't bring himself to answer. The man had been through so much, and lost so much, that Edmer couldn't bear to cause him any more grief. Instead, he answered, "I can't say, Damarr. I can't say." Most of the Fyündular's jobs ended more complicated than they had begun. The kidnapped wife had really taken up with another man; the mad wizard was just a boyfriend the parents hadn't approved of. The complicated machinations of the human heart baffled and disturbed him. This case was no different. They all ended difficultly. He knew. Despite how much he had grown to like Damarr, he once again remembered why he chose to live his life without the company of others. And as he turned to leave, refusing Damarr's meager purse as reward for finding Lewin, he also remembered why he was always so poor. Instead, he made his way back to the tavern in town, and let it be known that a Fyündular was available should anyone need tracking, finding, or retrieving of their goods. Another would come; they always did. He knew.

Later that night, eyes glowing, he returned to Damarr's farm and carved an indecipherable message into the fence.

Darkly Silver Dialogues - The First

By Joan Burkey

A patch of darkly silver velvet moved just to my left, instantly followed by my own startled reaction. I had been so intent on spotting the Gellesh that I hadn't been paying attention to gradual movement. That, I quickly told myself, was as it should be concerning these elusive much mythicized guides.

Then it was gone. Just gone.

I could neither spot any darkly silver patch of velvety shadows, nor detect any trace of new swirlings in the surrounding scentscape. Nothing. I twisted in a slow casual turn, and searched carefully with all the sensory skills I had. Nothing.

Had I created it myself? Imagined that one of the legendary stealthcloaks had appeared there in the dappled shadow?

Had I been so intent on detecting the Gellesh before the guild scouts did, that I had conjured a mental image and superimposed it over some nearby silvered mammoth fern fronds?

I hoped not. We were out here in this lush borderland to wilderness at my insistence. I, above all, needed to remain serene and alert at all times. I was the one that had stubbornly stood fast on the condition that we would need the Gellesh's skills. I was the one who had repeatedly refused to allow guild scouts to be our sole resource as we inched our way through the final leg of our journey toward The Seer's Shadow. I was the one who had forced an attempt to engage Gellesh skills for this foray into forgotten territories. I was also the one recently very much worried that we would not be met in time to find benefit from Gellesh wisdoms.

I allowed myself a small frustrated exhalation of pent up breath, when without warning a sudden impact from the rear instantly deposited me face down on the ground.

At some measure of odds with my reputation of cool logic and studied paths of action, I have historically maintained a lithe and muscular body, kept in constant toned state of readiness. Thus, long ingrained responses kicked in, and I was immediately upright, and loosely crouched in a subtly anchored stance of watchful alertness.

Another sudden impact from the rear, and once again I was face down.

Again I rapidly rolled to upright. And again I was knocked to the ground from behind.

One thing I'm not at all stubborn about, is repetition of a behavior proven unprofitable . . . like resisting the wishes of an unknown force capable of repeatedly laying me out from behind. I stayed put, prone on the ground.

"You learn." The words came quietly, after a prolonged space of time filled only with forest sounds. It floated across shadowy spaces in the direction pointed out by my feet.

"Expand upon your request," was eventually added, after another long space of birds chirping, insects buzzing, and foliage rustling in breezes.

That was a new one. I had never learned of initial contact done this way. Was it indeed a true Gellesh? Can't say I enjoyed its behavior so far, if it was . . . but I was obviously on its turf, not mine, whatever it was.

I was laying out my initial words in my mind, hesitant to speak without doing so, lest I break some unseen rule specific to what must be a unique Gellesh among the universal uniqueness of the Gellesh.

I was still debating with myself, when suddenly there were more quiet words. “Speak now.”

“May I sit?” tumbled from my mouth. Birds chirped. Insects buzzed. Foliage rustled.

Had I chosen the wrong words by allowing the unmeasured question to slip out? Then, from a direction now somewhere off to my left, there came, “Sit.”

I carefully pulled up my legs and rolled to a cross-legged sitting position. “May I continue to ask questions?”

More birds. Insects. Foliage. Then I caught the darkly silver velvet patch’s appearance in peripheral vision to my right.

“Ask,” seemed to come from it.

“May I see you?” I asked, turning my head toward the patch. It disappeared before my eyes reached the spot where it had been.

“No.” The words floated out, surrounding me. I could not pinpoint their direction. “Only ask.”

Known Rule Number One: Follow only the instructions given.

Known Rule Number Two: Don’t try to find the exact location of this Gellesh when beginning an encounter.

“Have you heard of The Seer’s Shadow?” I began.

“I have.”

“Can you find its location?”

“I can.”

I resisted a sudden gasp reflex. Smothered it. No outward changes. Stay still. Internally, however, I was bouncing and celebrating the possibility that The Seer’s Shadow might NOT be some balladeer’s embroidery on a tale grown boring.

“Have you seen it?” I asked.

“I have not.”

Again I had to smother visible reaction to the words. Now the internal bouncing steadied to the steady vibration of gaming. The Gellesh could get to the location, but had never seen The Seer’s Shadow. This was a puzzle. This was more typical of Gellesh behaviors of which I had read.

Now I was more comfortable, beginning to feel in my own element. I have always been good at solving Gellesh puzzles before learning their solution.

Thus began the first of many odd and darkly silver dialogues with the Gellesh that would lead us to re-discover, among other things, an ancient passageway to other places.

Drifter

By J.T. Slane

Nioma rubbed her eyes on the back of her hand and shouldered the coop door open. The smell of the chicken droppings met her in a smothering stench. The sleeping hens were quiet, but she could hear the honking of geese as they winged overhead outside. Cradling the wicker basket on her arm, she slipped her hand beneath Big Yellow and placed two brown eggs in the basket.

Marm, the next one, was barren, which was surprising. That made two days in a row and she normally laid three. She'd have to remember to check her during the day in case she was getting sick. Niah had two, normal.

A creak sounded above her.

Looking up, she glimpsed a pair of brown eyes scrutinizing her from the rafters.

"Seitherell's whelp!" she gasped, nearly dropping the basket. There was a man in the rafters of the chicken coop. Already he was moving, boots crossing surefooted over the slats before he dropped down in front of the door, blocking it.

"A maid who swears as well as she sings. I like that."

She clutched the basket to her chest, keeping back, slinking further into the coop shadows. Some of the hens were roused from their slumber and began clucking.

"I'll not harm you, lass. Shed the fear from your countenance. I was only sleeping aloft, and I'll be on my way this very morn."

Nioma bit her lip, staring at the man. He was leaner than a fence rail, all elbows, knees, and shoulders jutting from a thick sheepskin vest, buckskins, and boots. His hair was well silvered, though he could not be older than twenty-five summers, and shaggy as a wolf. A scar ran jagged across his forehead, and another notched his chin.

"You're...you're a Drifter."

"You say it as if I were a skunk that just sprayed you. Known many Drifters, lass?" His eyes narrowed knowingly.

She blushed. "No! By Seitherell. No! Father doesn't like them. And Mother has told me many things. Jomb knew one from Havenrook who stole his hunting knife during the night."

"'Tis not a fair judgment, lass, comparing us all to the ilk of Havenrook. 'Tis hardly fair at all. I find that disharmonious coming from a fair lass such as yourself."

"Let me go, sir." She stepped further back, wondering if she should scream.

"I've already given you my sworn promise, lass. I'll not harm you. I've feasted on the eggs of your hens, so I owe your family some labor. I can wield an ax and balance wood on a block. And would be honored to carve you some firewood. I noticed the pile was getting low."

"No, sir. The eggs are a gift. If you'd like more, just take them. Please, I think you should leave."

"Why do you fear me, lass?"

"You're a Drifter."

"Aye, I be that. But why fear it? I don't have the pox. Is my breath foul then?"

"Please, sir. Just go."

"I will. I can see that my presence disturbs you. But I would like to listen again to one more of your songs. Sing for me, lass."

She nudged the tip of her shoe along a floorboard groove. Several of the chickens were clucking hungrily now, flapping free of the crates and searching the floor between them. It made her feel slightly better, knowing they were an obstacle, though feathery ones.

"You spied me singing? When?"

"I spy many things, lass." His eyes narrowed again, a broad grin spreading over his whiskered mouth. Her mouth went dry. "Your fear offends me. What evil deeds have you heard of my kind? We only live in the land and occasionally nestle with those who live on her as well. We wander, it is true, but hardly a crime."

"But is it true that you do not accept Seitherell? You are...you are pagan. Anathema. Your

soul is beyond hope."

"Have you suddenly turned pious on me, my little hen? Yet you curse by the name of the god you claim I deny. Yet it is true. We do not worship in the cities, and thus do not fall under the priest's coercion."

"You speak blasphemy, sir."

"Fluently."

Part of her wanted to giggle at that, and she tried not to smile.

"You might as well cage a little wren, as a smile such as that. Why constrain it? How ungenerous of you."

"I should not laugh in front of strangers."

"May you burp or belch instead? I would find that equally amusing."

"Sir!"

"I only jest. We are not all of us knaves, lass. Do not misjudge what you know so little about. I am proud to be a Drifter. It is a fine thing to be free. And to show you I mean you and your family no ill will, I shall leave you presently. As soon as you give me a smile."

Could she trust him? Dare she?

A little smile flickered on Nioma's face.

"You smite me, my lady," he said, clapping his hand to his breast. "If you would, sing that little ditty you know. The one you sing when doing the washing. I'll be listening for it again, after midsun. Let me carry that tune with me when I travel. And then I'll bother ye no more."

"I will not promise, sir. I shall tell my father about you."

"Do not be so unkind to a weary Drifter. Grace me with a song as you did with a smile. And if you are merciful, leave the soap by the basin when you go back inside. It is something I do not enjoy often enough. And then I will leave you."

"I...I may do that. Sir."

"I'm not a knight, my lady. Call me Drifter. That is what I am."

And with a brazen wink, he opened the coop door and stole into the farmyard, leaving Nioma standing in the shadows, her heart beating like a rabbit, with a sigh of relief and yet a pang of disappointment.

She did sing as she scrubbed the clothes that afternoon. And when she came back the next morning, the soap was gone. But she found a wildflower stem beneath the basin.

Tresllar

By Mike Loos

Rae'vehn knew her target was too far away but, ignoring her instincts, she held her next breath and released the shot from her bow. The arrow flew in a precise arc, silent but for a slight rush of air as it raced towards the far hillside. A burst of snow and earth marked the sudden impact, sending the large figure that was her prey scrambling for better cover.

Missed him! Rae'vehn muttered a curse while straining to follow the path of her target, but she quickly lost sight of him in the lengthening shadows. She shook her head. Rae'vehn couldn't remember a time when she had missed a shot that badly. Fortunate that she was alone

on this hunt and saved the embarrassment of explaining such a pathetic attempt to any of her brethren, let alone her brother. The difficulty of the shot would have not lessened Hel'vehn's disapproving growl any more than it reduced her own disappointment. Rae'vehn muttered impatiently to herself.

She knew the thief couldn't vanish completely. The crystals he carried made him far more simple to track than he probably realized. Rae'vehn slipped a hand into the folds of her jacket and took hold of the small yltic that was huddled inside. She could feel the rhythmic throbbing under it's closely-cropped fur, a sign that her goal was still within reach. Were she as skilled as Hel'vehn, she would be able to judge more accurately the distance and direction, by nothing more than the creature's purr. But even her immature skills appeared sufficient for now. She caressed the small creature while feeding it small nuts retrieved from her pocket.

The *chiave'te* did not belong to the one she pursued. Rather, he had stolen the crystals from her family. There were a matched set of two and the despicable bandit had managed to pilfer both. Worse yet, he snatched them on Rae'vehn's watch, which made it all that more necessary for her to take up the pursuit, albeit alone, into the forbidden north. That was three days ago. Now she was far from home, many leagues from Il'Strd, seat of the elvish lords and jewel of the western Silvandom. Rae'vehn knew well that a full search party might have made more sense to chase this scoundrel, but that would have brought an unbearable level of dishonor and shame upon her. She considered herself the equal of any of her brothers, even if she had not obtained status herself. Taking responsibility for her own missteps, regardless of the challenge, was the only way she was going to prove that she was worthy.

Rae'vehn could feel the wind start to pick up speed. This far north, it was an inevitable indicator that night was approaching. Rae'vehn swung down from the large piilstich tree that she had been using as a lookout, charging forward even as her feet met the ground. The terrain sloped sharply away, drawing her directly into a deep ravine. Rae'vehn propelled herself forward, sliding carefully through the loose shale and aging snow. She moved quickly to the bottom of the draw and back up the facing side. The climb was steady, but Rae'vehn covered the distance easily. She could tell from the steady throbbing of the yltic that she was getting very close to the chiave'te. Then she saw it.

A small leather pouch lay on the ground, obscured by a low thicket of beech brush. Rae'vehn approached cautiously, her eyes scanning the area for any sign of its owner. *The fool must've dropped it in his haste to escape*, Rae'vehn decided. *Finally,* she thought as the relief washed over her. *I can return now to reclaim my honor*.

Suddenly, a sharp prick to her neck, like a small insect bite, ended her quiet revelry. Rae'vehn's reflexes were quick to react, but even more quickly she felt her world fading to black. *When did I get so stupid?* She dropped to the ground and wondered no more.

* * *

Rae'vehn awoke to complete darkness, lying on a cold damp rock. The air was very still and she could detect neither light nor sound, save her own breathing. Her limbs were not bound, to her surprise, but she could barely move. Her legs were very weak. They were almost useless, in fact, and she wondered how she might even sit up, let alone stand. She was able to push herself off the ground with her arms and pull herself forward, dragging her legs behind. Within a few feet, she discovered a large rock against which she was able to prop herself up in a basic sitting position. Small victory. Rae'vehn realized then that she had been relieved of her satchel

and bow, though thankfully not her clothes. Not that she was a particularly modest person, but it was a bit cold on the ground.

After sitting there for several minutes, Rae'vehn wished that her abductors had at least left her a light. *Better to keep your captive guessing and little bit afraid*, she decided. Rae'vehn insisted to herself that she was not going to show fear, not matter what they did to her.

Then she heard a sound directly behind her.

CRaaacK!

And a flash of light.

Rae'vehn's heart jumped and her pulse raced. She turned to face the direction of the light which now blinded her.

"Hello?" she asked, raising her hand to block the light.

"Yes, I see you're finally awake," came a voice that she did not recognize. But she knew who it was.

"Where am I?! And why have you taken me?"

"Well, if you remember correctly, you were shooting at me," came the slow, measured response. "I had to put a stop to that, at least"

As he spoke, Rae'vehn eyes slowly adjusted to the small light source in her captor's hand. He was holding what looked like a torch that illuminated most of his large frame. The effect made him look bigger than he really was, although Rae'vehn knew from following him for the last few days that he was quite large anyway.

"So, is there a chance I'm going to get the chance to walk again, or were you just planning to leave me here to drag myself back south?"

"Well, I guess that depends on you."

The man drew steadily closer as Rae'vehn prepared herself for the worst. She knew there was precious little she could do in her current state, but she certainly wasn't going to just lie there either. She fumbled around for something she could use to defend herself. The man seemed not to notice. Instead, he crouched in front of her, placing a large hand upon her leg. Strangely, she could feel exactly where his fingers connected with her body, even though everything below her waist was now quite numb. Steadily, the sensation of his touch traveled up one leg and down the other as Rae'vehn realized she could now move her legs again. The man stood up, backing away.

"That's a nifty trick," she said. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"I would not try to stand up," he said, ignoring her question. "At least not for a few moments. And I can return you to paralysis at a moment's notice, so please don't give me a reason to do so."

As he spoke, the man circled around Rae'vehn, moving into the darkness behind her. He didn't travel far, though, before appearing to reach a wall on the far side of the chamber. He reached up high on the rock surface, lighting what appeared to be another torch. The chamber filled with light. As her captor turned back to her, Rae'vehn's eyes widened as his face came into view. His features were quite ordinary; what startled her were the intricate set of markings on both sides of his face. Rae'vehn could barely contain her wonder.

"By Seitherell's grace! You're a *tresllar*, aren't you?"

The man nodded.

"I cannot believe this. I've been chasing a tresllar for the last three days? How is that possible? If you're really a tresllar, it is said that you can move through the forest like dreams through the night. How is it that I was able to track a tresllar for more than three minutes, let

alone three days? I don't understand. Who are you?"

"My name is Garrett. And I know that yours is Rae'vehn. You should know that I have no intention of harming you."

"Well, that's comforting," Rae'vehn replied, her voice wavering a little. "But, if you remember correctly, I'm the one who's been chasing *you* for the last three days. What makes you think I'm not going to harm you?!"

"I don't," replied Garrett. "But beforehand, you will likely be more interested in this."

Garrett reached back into his vest and removed a small item. He tossed it to Rae'vehn, who caught it expectantly. Her eyes brightened as she realized what it was.

"The chiave'te you stole from Il'Strd. But why?"

Garrett didn't answer.

"Now I really don't get it," she continued. "You obviously let me follow you, then you ambushed and brought me here, to this place. Now you're giving me back the very thing you stole in the first place. What was the point?"

"I need your help."

"My help?!" Rae'vehn shook her head. "Now why would I help you?"

"Because I'm guessing you also want back the other chiave'te you're missing. Surely you noticed that I kept it?"

Rae'vehn's eyebrows arched upwards.

"And, more importantly, the task I have is of grave importance to your people. Without your help, many will die."

"Uh huh. I see. So why should I trust you? I should just kill you right now, take the chiave'te back and be done with it," she said.

Garrett smiled. "That's always an option for you. Assuming, of course, you *can* kill me. Over the last few days, you haven't even managed to injure me."

She just glared back at him.

"You may not trust me, but I think I can trust you," Garrett continued. "The blood of our mutual ancestors runs in your veins and the heart of adventure beats in your chest. Seitherell did not lead you here by chance." Rae'vehn realized then that he was holding her satchel and bow in his hands. He tossed them to her. "The rest is up to you."

"The Empress grows restless and the borders will soon fail to contain the barbarian hordes. It is time to test old alliances and develop new ones in unexpected places."

Garrett pulled Rae'vehn to her feet. He pointed to the far end of the chamber and indicated that she should follow him. When they reached the far wall, Garrett crouched down and removed a small bundle from his coat. Rae'vehn watched him carefully. He unwrapped the package, revealing a section of blank parchment and a thin piece of charcoal that he placed on the ground.

"Take the chiave'te that I gave you, the red one, and hold it up to the light. Bring it close to your eye, so you're able to look through it. Hold it there for a few moments."

Rae'vehn hesitated for a moment, but then did as he asked.

"Now face the wall and close your eyes. Keep them closed."

She followed his instructions.

"Even with your eyes closed, you should still be able to see the light of the chiave'te in your mind. Now imagine that you can see the wall as well. Visualize the patterns on the surface of the rock and tell me what you see."

Rae'vehn focused on the wall, but saw nothing.

"What am I looking for? I can't see a thing."

"Here, come this way a bit." Garrett grabbed her arm and pulled her a small distance down the wall. "Now, try again. You're looking for a set of small symbols. They should appear to have been etched into the wall."

Rae'vehn still saw nothing, so they moved again. And again.

"Keep trying," he said. "I know they're here. You just have to concentrate."

"I am concentrating, but I don't see *anything*. Why don't you try? You seem to know what you're looking for."

Garrett stopped. "It pointless for me to try, because I can't see them. That's why it was necessary to bring you here. Only one of your kind, a high-born elf, can use the chiave'te to read the cipher. But you can't understand it's meaning. Only a tresllar can translate the symbols. So we both have a job to do here."

"Oh," she replied. She turned back to the wall and took a long look. She then took another long look through the crystal, drew a deep breath, and closed her eyes again.

Seconds passed, but Rae'vehn convinced herself to be patient. Behind her eyelids, her view was dominated by the afterimage of the crimson chiave'te, but gradually she could start to imagine the features of the rock. She was startled when the crystal in her hand began to feel very warm. She reacted by opening her eyes.

"Look, Garrett." She held up the stone. It was glowing on its own. She turned back to the wall and caught her breath.

"By Seitherell, I can see the writing," she said. Rae'vehn stared at a small series of symbols, glowing faintly in the same color as the chiave'te.

"Good. Now, copy them down. Quickly." Garrett pressed the parchment and charcoal into her hands.

Rae'vehn took the materials and started to draw.

"You must take care to be accurate. I cannot see the characters, so I won't be able to tell if you've copied them correctly. Make certain that you preserve their positions relative to one another. And you must go quickly; the image that you see will not remain there long," he said.

"Ok, ok. I'll get it right. Just give me some space."

Garrett backed away. The transcription process took several minutes, but Rae'vehn finished as quickly as she could. She checked her results, just as the images slowly faded to nothing. "Ok, I think I have it." She handed the parchment back to him.

Garrett stared intently at the symbols, turning the parchment around several times. Rae'vehn kept quiet and let him examine the drawings for a little while. But she quickly grew impatient again.

"What does it say? Can you read it?"

Garrett didn't answer her right away. He seemed lost in thought.

"Garrett?"

"It's a map," he finally replied. "Not what I was expecting, but useful nonetheless."

Garrett stuffed the parchment in his pack and shouldered it as he started walking back across the chamber. "Come now, we have a lot of ground to cover."

* * *

Late afternoon arrived as a gradual lengthening of shadows upon the forest ground. A cool breeze drifted through the trees, reminding Rae'vehn that twilight would soon be upon them,

then darkness, turning the forest into a brand new landscape.

"We're getting close now." Garrett said as Rae'vehn followed behind him. They had spent the better part of the day climbing into the mountains, following a ridge that traced the western edge. The trail now gradually led down a gentle incline, taking them off the ridge into a narrow and heavily wooded canyon. Garrett had said little since they emerged from the caves. That was fine with Rae'vehn; a lot had happened in the last couple of days that she needed to think about. If she looked behind, through the trees, Rae'vehn could look out across the Silvandom to the south, a view that reminded her just how far away from home she really was.

Throughout the day, Rae'vehn often felt distracted and unable to clear her thoughts. Unsettling images would flash in her mind and at times, she would feel as if someone was listening to her thoughts. These feelings generated a slight feeling of paranoia, and Rae'vehn caught herself looking over her shoulder a few times as if she heard someone speaking behind her. Garrett must've noticed a look of duress on her face, because he raised the issue.

"You're hearing the voices, aren't you?"

Rae'vehn, surprised, looked him directly in the eyes.

"It's the cristeset. The Grey Cristeset. We're very close to their territory."

Rae'vehn shuddered. The tale of the cristeset was well-taught to all elvish children, particularly how previous generations had attempted to subjugate the noble birds with magic, but succeeded only in inadvertently giving them great power *and* a deep mistrust, even hatred, for the elves. At that point, the feelings that Rae'vehn was sensing made a lot more sense.

Garrett stopped. From somewhere not far away, a new sound drew his attention. Rae'vehn heard it as well. Garrett crouched behind a large tree and put a finger to his lips as he looked back at Rae'vehn. Someone or something was making noises up ahead.

"I think we might have company," Garrett whispered.

"Friends of yours?" Rae'vehn asked as she moved behind him. She automatically reached for her knife.

"I doubt it," Garrett replied. If he was concerned, it wasn't apparent in his voice. The tresllar didn't move or speak further. He simply stared down the steep trail.

Rae'vehn looked too, but saw nothing save the swaying of tree limbs in the wind. Suddenly, she caught a glimpse of a dark figure huddled just off the trail ahead. Garrett must have seen it as well, but gave no indication or sign. Instead, he reached behind his back and gave a signal for Rae'vehn to stay put as he moved slowly and silently around the side of the tree. Before she could even consider protesting, he was gone.

Frustrated, she stared back down the trail. *If he thinks I'm just going to sit here until he comes back, he's not been paying attention very well.* She wasn't sure what to do, however. As she stared down the trail, a shadow suddenly passed through the trees. *Garrett*. But as soon as she thought she spotted him the image vanished from view. She continued to wait.

A muffled cry, further down into the canyon, followed by the sound of drawn blades, snapped Rae'vehn to attention. She couldn't stand to wait any longer. She notched an arrow to her bow and charged into the forest.

Rae'vehn plunged through the trees, dodging rocks and fallen timber. Branches tore at her face as she raced down the hillside. Quickly, she ran through the trees into a large clearing that opened up to the sky. At the edge of the clearing lay three unmoving figures in black robes, sprawled out in various battle postures. Barbarians. Warriors of Boetia. Worse yet, they were many leagues south of their realm. Not a good sign. The bodies were partially obscured by the long grass that waved in the wind, but Rae'vehn could tell that each had met their end in a

sudden, violent way.

"I thought I instructed you to stay where you were."

Startled, Rae'vehn whipped around. No one was there. But, she was convinced she heard Garrett's voice. *If so, where was he?* Rae'vehn then felt a hand on her shoulder. Instinctively, she reacted, ducking under her assailant to turn and to attack. As she leveled her first blow, she was repelled by an expert block. Garrett then immediately pushed her away to put some space between them.

"You! Where did you come from?" Rae'vehn asked.

"I was here the whole time. I just chose not to be seen."

"Wonderful. Thanks for the warning." Rae'vehn glared at him. "I'm guessing this is your handiwork?" Rae'vehn pointed to the barbarian corpses.

"You could say that. Unfortunately, their presence here, although not unexpected, is a confirmation of my worst fears. We don't have much time."

Garrett gently grabbed Rae'vehn by both shoulders.

"Rae'vehn, I need you to go back to your people and carry a message. Take the map, the chiave'te and this with you." Garrett bent down to one of the dead barbarians and removed an intricate necklace, made of thin bones and tiny sand gems. He handed the necklace to her.

"Show these to your elders. They should then believe that you have been here. Tell them everything that you've seen."

Rae'vehn nodded.

"After that, you must return here, as quickly as you can. You and I have another puzzle piece to find and an important conversation to have with an old friend of mine."

"But, what about the other chiave'te? I can't go back without it." Rae'vehn said.

"I'm sorry, Rae'vehn, but I must keep it. If for nothing else, to make sure your people actually listen and let you come back. If I have the crystal, you should also have no trouble finding me."

"But…"

Garrett looked directly into her eyes. She felt him calming her, although she didn't understand how.

"By Seitherell! I think we missed a couple bad guys," Garrett said. He pointed urgently behind Rae'vehn back into the trees.

Rae'vehn spun around, drawing her bow and scanning the forest. There was nothing there. Her stomach sank. *I've got to get better at this.*

She sighed and didn't even bother to turn back around. She just started walking back up to the trail to find her way home.

Garrett smiled as he went the other direction.

The Saintly Fianche of Malitane

By Amy Butler

The ceiling was high and vaulted, held up by pillars and connected by double arches. The monastery extended as far as her eye could see, lit brightly by dozens of candles and torches in sconces on the pillars. Along the walls of the monastery, the monuments to great people: lords and kings, saints and mages, long dead, were erected, the only remaining testament to the piety and wealth of their occupants. Monks of the Order of the Forgotten ambled around with serene expressions. Villagers stood in little groups, bewildered and awed looks on their faces as they talked with the monks, asking advice on the harvest, healing for the sick, and prayers for soldiers far from home.

Ciara stood just within the doorway, smoothing her silk dress and looking condescendingly on all the villagers. She had walked in several minutes ago and was still waiting to be approached. The villagers gave her a wide berth, and the monks seemed oblivious to her presence. Ciara, her noble patience finally worn thin, beckoned to a monk.

A long-haired, bearded monk strolled over to her, bowing at the waist. "My lady."

Ciara smiled thinly, inclining her head. "I am Lady Ciara, daughter of the Duke Lorran and heir to his estates."

"You honor us with your presence, my lady," the monk said demurely. His face was blank and unimpressed as he looked at her. Another, younger-looking monk wandered up to his side, smiling widely and bowing to her too. "How may we serve you?"

"I am here on a pilgrimage," Ciara replied. "I've traveled long and far to honor a saint beloved by my people and by my father. I am told you have the remains of Saint Fianche of Malitane here."

She had hoped the monks would welcome pilgrims and would show her the tomb, but they didn't seem inclined to show anyone the monument. That was disappointing, and it was going to make her job later much more difficult.

The serene faces of the monks changed subtly, hardening. The second monk glanced to the first, but the first ignored him. Instead, his gaze dropped to her neck.

"Your medallion," he said smoothly. "Where did you get it?"

Ciara tried to keep the scowl off her face. Blasted medallion. She had forgotten to take it off again. "Family heirloom."

He nodded. "My dear lady, if only it was true, but we are not honored with the remains of that great saint. I'm sorry."

The monks turned and left quickly, not giving Ciara a chance to protest. Her eyes narrowed, and she tapped her fingers on the palm of her hand. She waited a minute, and then nonchalantly started wandering away to her left, along the wall of the monastery, glancing up and down the tombs. Her impatience grew as she passed one tomb, two, three, walking much too slowly for her taste. Her eyes flickered down the row of tombs, which extended into the gray

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Featured Artist
Sandrine Gestin

Age: 34
Residence: France, Dordogne
Marital Status: Live with a man for 13 years.
Children: None.
Hobbies: Painting.
Personal Quote: Let the light enter in your life.
Favorite Book or Author: Orson Scott Card.
Started Painting In: 1993
Artist Most Inspired By: Préraphaelites painters, Veermer, Rembrandt…
Media You Work In: Oil on canvas.
Schools Attended: École supérieure d'arts graphique mets de penninghen à Paris.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: In france, Canada and germany.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally:
sandrine@sandrinegestin.com
Website URL: www.sandrinegestin.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I think that I always have been an artist. But, at 18, I entered an "art graphic high school." I learned a lot.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: It's a medieval and celtic work.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: I don't know precisely... In my dreams, in music, in my imaginary world.

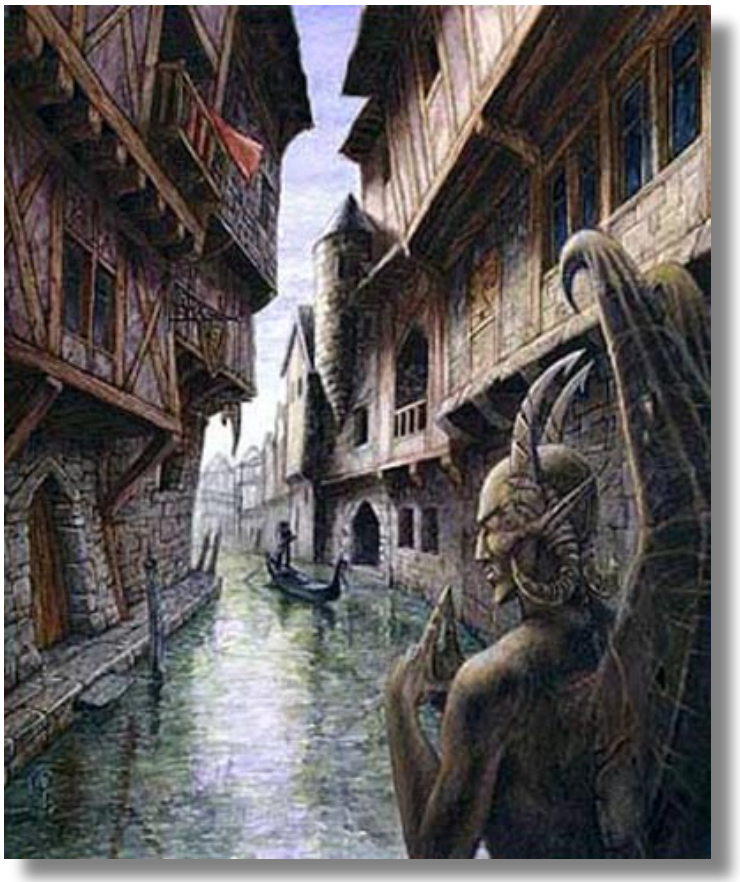
Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)
A: A lady asked me to paint one for her room. I decided to draw a woman who is dreaming…

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Préraphaelites painters, Veermer, Rembrandt…

continued on next page

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: I really don't have a greatest success… It's more a succession of small success. But, I can say that I am proud of my four children's books.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/ Fantasy genre?
A: I really don't know. I'm far from the world of Sci-Fi/Fantasy... I would like more beauty and less monsters.



In Harm's Way

By Michael Graves

Those who would follow the path of the warrior
must put themselves ever in harm's way.
- Gar-Dalian. The Code of the Ramada.

Vin-Cerebos strode across the small courtyard, dust spiralling into the air as the heels of his boots struck the dry earth. Ahead of him waited fifty of the King's soldiers under the command of one of the most respected swordsmen ever to wield a blade. His stomach churned with dread at the course of action he had chosen, but he let none of his fears show on his handsome face. He came to a halt five paces from the man who would most likely kill him this day and stared into the iron-grey eyes.

Gar-Dalian's salute was crisp and efficient, eyes alert as he took in the figure before him. "Greetings Vin-Cerebos. You are looking well."

Cerebos returned the salute and the greeting, forcing the words from his dry throat. Many years had passed since his last meeting with the older warrior, yet those years had been kind to Gar-Dalian. Devotion to his craft combined with hours of practise every day had resulted in a physique at the peak of fitness.

"In the name of my liege- Vin-Cerebos, I respectfully request that you set aside your resistance. Return the King's betrothed to my charge and no further action will be taken."

Not as powerful as his former teacher, he was still an impressive figure, muscles solid beneath the light armour he wore. "Your answer pleases me Cerebos, though it gives me little pleasure to have to fight you in this cause."

It was the moment that Cerebos had most feared. The temptation to take the offer gnawed at him, almost irresistible. The words that emerged from his mouth did so without conscious thought. "My service is pledged to the Lady Melaxa. She was taken against her will by agents of your King, her parents murdered for refusing to grant her hand. The King therefore holds no legitimate claim on her." Cerebos listened to his own speech as though it came from another. "My honour does not permit me to step aside in this matter. My challenge remains. Leave this place or face me in single combat."

Gar-Dalian lowered his head briefly. He had expected no other answer from one who had been his finest student; would have been disappointed if the offer had been taken. Cerebos had changed much since leaving his side. The youth had blossomed into a fine man. His eyes were level with Dalian's, steady and filled with a sincere belief in his cause and his ability. Not as powerful as his former teacher, he was still an impressive figure, muscles solid beneath the light armour he wore. "Your answer pleases me Cerebos, though it gives me little pleasure to have to fight you in this cause."

The dropping of his formal title surprised Cerebos, as did the regret plainly visible on

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Notes On Beginnings: Stay With Scudder

By M. Thomas

The knights of Kukudil had protected the kingdom since the very first days of Yar. In the midst of the battle of Humberdink, the knight Everbright led a small detachment of men up the hill to where the foul wizard Nightbane was summoning his demons, and slew him. Since then, they were carriers of the swords of Truth, highly regarded by man and woman alike.

Let's jump right in here. This is an info dump. Why? Because it's got info in it that has already happened (back story), and it's being dumped on the reader. "But M," I hear you saying, "I've got to give a bit history at *some* point in my fantasy or sci-fi epic." Of course you do. But let's talk about placement. One of the biggest problems a writer faces is where to start their story.

"But M," I hear you saying, "I started it at the beginning." Really? Then what's going to come after this little info dump? Ah yes. You're going to bring your reader into the future, where the scullery boy Scudder, the eventual hero, is looking at the stars.

Scudder looked up at the stars from his spot on the ramparts. They were huge and beautiful. Nearby, one of the knights of Kukudil pretended not to notice him. A lot of people pretended not to notice him. It was one of the joys of being a scullery boy.

You've just made one of the second most common beginning mistakes. (And not just for beginners, either.) Yes, you've started with Scudder, but then you left Scudder to give us an info dump.

So, if the entire story is about Scudder, why does it start with the knights of Kukudil? He's going to eventually become one, you say? Of course he is. And when he does, *then* you can tell us all about their grand heritage. If the story starts with Scudder, *stay* with Scudder.

"Fine," I hear you saying. "I can just rearrange a bit."

Scudder looked up at the stars from his spot on the ramparts. They were huge and beautiful. Nearby, one of the knights of Kukudil pretended not to notice him. A lot of people pretended not to notice him. It was one of the joys of being a scullery boy.

The knights of Kukudil had protected the kingdom since the very first days of Yar. In the midst of the battle of Humberdink…

Stop right there. You've just made one of the second most common beginning mistakes. (And not just for beginners, either.) Yes, you've started with Scudder, but then you left Scudder to give us an info dump. You've caused your reader to get going, then stop to absorb info they

don't need right now. Go to any writer's workshop and you will see fantasy authors writing epic works and almost always following this pattern: first paragraph, set up scene with main character; second paragraph, info dump back story; third paragraph, return to main character, who has not moved. You might even find something like this on the shelves of major bookstores. You *might* have even seen it happen in a little novel run in this e-zine last year called *Found Things*. I'm only teaching what I learn, people. That little young adult novel is the best catalyst for learning I've ever had.

Say it with me now. If you start with Scudder, *stay* with Scudder. This is part of the "murder your darlings" theory. Fantasy writers will cling to their beginning info dumps like cats on curtains. Getting rid of mine felt like pulling my own fingernails out. I had my teeth clenched the entire time. But let me tell you a secret, lean in close now…

It's not going to hurt your story. I promise. It'll be a little uncomfortable at first, but once you get in the habit of moving the story along, you'll see that you've engaged your reader with the first paragraph, and continued to drive them along by keeping them with the character, which is where their loyalties should lie. And in case you're tempted to give us the info on the nights of Kukudil in a prologue, think about this. Why? Slapping a "prologue" or even the fancier "prelude" label on it isn't going to change anything. Your reader still has to wade through it to get to Scudder, don't they? So why not just start with Scudder?

Keep this in mind: "If you have to rely on your readers' patience while you get the story set up, you're likely to lose most of them. Start where the protagonist's problem starts, or just before that, and feed in the backstory later." (Alicia Rasley)

Here are some more beginners' blunders that keep your story from being told.

Look, Ma! An Epic Poem I Writ!

"And so these three, from days of yore,
Shall meet again on yonder shore,
And there be cast into darkest gloom,
And fight to the end of their doom."

We like this because we admire earlier fantasy writers who have used it. It impresses us. It makes the story seem to have ambiance and history. Unfortunately, very few people have the skill to create truly good epic poetry. The rhymes are trite at best, and at worst completely abstract. It also doesn't have anything to do with Scudder right now, and it won't until he becomes the hero. If you are *very* good at this type of poetry, and know it because you're winning awards for it and an editor at a major publishing house is praising you for it, then leave it in. Otherwise, get to the story already. This goes for vague quotes from books or people we haven't met in the story yet as well.

Birthin' Babies

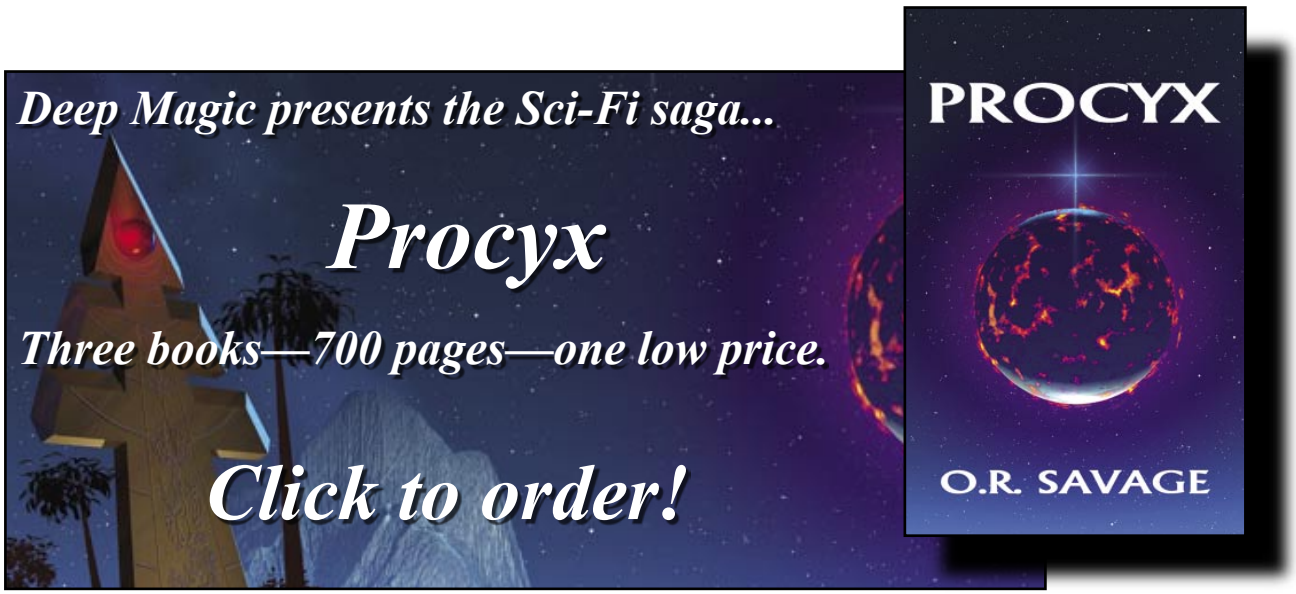
It's always tempting to begin with the birth of the hero. However, keep this in mind: "The story itself should begin at the latest possible moment before the climax, at a point when events take a decisive and irreversible turn. We may learn later, through flashbacks, exposition, or inference, about events occurring before the beginning of the story." (Crawford Kilian)

Sure, the stars may have aligned at Scudder's birth, but he didn't see it, did he? His

personal wizard can tell him about it later. Start with Scudder. Stay with Scudder.

Ultimately, all of these rules can be broken, if it's done well. Tomorrow, I'll go to the bookstore, pick up a book by my favorite author, and see that they've done all of this and more. I'll sigh, go back to my work in progress, and remind myself that when I'm Eddings, Pratchett, Gaimon, Goodkind, Brooks, Dart-Thornton, or who have you, I can do anything I want. Until then, I'll continue to hone my craft by repeating my little mantra.

Start with Scudder. Stay with Scudder.



Hunting with Flinteye

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

The human flipped a document onto the table and turned it around so that I could read it, then sat quietly while I skimmed through it. I shoved it back an inch with one claw when I was done.

"So?" he asked, taking a sip from his drink—most likely to calm his nerves. A lot of beings get the jitters near me.

"No. I don't baby-sit tourists," I hissed.

He needed another gulp before he could respond to that. "But Flinteye, look—you see the price they're offering?"

I had seen it; a hefty sum—50,000 SEUs—and an excellent fee for that type of job.

"Three beings from the heart of the Alliance, who have probably never stepped into any wilderness that wasn't covered by a dome, want a guided tour of Asi XII's quaint little outback? No. Not even for that money."

"You're being unreasonable. It says right here that they're interested in hunting, and have done it before. The one even claims to have brought down a stone manta."

The human was gaining a little courage—perhaps he was thinking of the go-between fee that he would earn if I took the job. It was very rare that anybody called me unreasonable, not without a bunch of goons at their back and a plasma launcher at their side. "It just means that I'd have to save their hides from every beast that they took a snipe at with their Alliance toys. And if I do get something good, I don't want to be shot in the back so he can have a new trophy."

He was lecturing me. It was fortunate for him that I was in a good mood. I tapped a claw on the first document. "I'll go see the group, and I'll tell them you sent me."

"So you're not even going to talk to them?"

"No."

"Flinteye, we both know how much you need the money. Your ship is mauled, and your 'bot' isn't much better."

He was getting courageous. I had taken only a minor job through his services before, and he was calling to mind my personal finances. I was still adamant.

"All right, here's one that you might prefer."

He slapped another document on the table with the air of a being who had been hoping to present it to someone else. I read that one too, and pushed it away more vehemently. "The same bunch of Alliance beings, eh? I don't do assassinations, no matter who the targets are and how much money the job is worth."

The human frowned and crossed his arms across his chest. "That's all I've got to show you. The rest are either outside your lines of work or require going off-planet—those I might show to you if you had a ship. Either one of these would give you enough SEUs to either buy a good new one or fix up the junk heap you have."

He was lecturing me. It was fortunate for him that I was in a good mood. I tapped a claw

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Farseer Trilogy: Assassin's Apprentice, Royal Assassin, and Assassin's Quest

By Robin Hobb

The market is a fickle beast. Even if an author is known for writing well-constructed novels, the vagaries of the market can result in some of the best novels sitting mid-list and their authors unable to secure the following they deserve. Megan Lindholm is one such instance. By 1996 she had written nine fantasy and sci-fi novels, all of which sold in the mid-list range. Then in 1996 her publisher, Bantam Books, 're-packaged' her as a new author, with the androgynous name Robin Hobb, and her career took off like never before.

The first book she wrote as Robin Hobb was the beginning of the Farseer Trilogy, *Assassin's Apprentice*. The next two novels rounded out the trilogy and firmly established her not only as one of high fantasy's most talented authors, but also as one of its best-selling—a reputation she greatly deserves.

The Farseer Trilogy focuses on the Farseer family, the ruling family of the kingdom known as the Six Duchies. King Shrewd is the current occupant of the Farseer throne and his son Chivalry is the next in line. However, Chivalry is disgraced when it is made known that he has sired a bastard with a peasant. He goes into self-imposed exile and soon after dies quietly.

The bastard child, however, has come into the care of the court of the Six Duchies. At first, Fitz (a name that means simply 'bastard' in the Six Duchies) is reared by Chivalry's former right-hand man, Burrich, who is now just a stableman. King Shrewd, however, soon moves Fitz to the court and sets him up in training as the next royal assassin, to take the place eventually of the current assassin, King Shrewd's half-brother, Chade. Fitz is destined, however, to be more than just an assassin, for he possesses the Skill, a magic that allows one to cast one's mind afar, as well as the despised Wit, which allows its bearer to speak with animals.

As Fitz grows up in the court, he quickly discovers the political intrigue that is broiling just below the surface. The Six Duchies are being attacked by barbarous raiders who have the ability to remove a person's soul without killing him. As King Shrewd attempts to deal with these Red Ship raiders, his youngest son, Regal, schemes to steal the throne from the true heir, Prince Verity. Fitz's final test is to assist on a mission to a far away mountain kingdom, a mission that may cost him his life.

Royal Assassin tells the story of how Fitz recovers from his near-fatal mission at the end of the previous novel while the political intrigue within the Farseer court increases. *Assassin's Quest* rounds out the story, revealing how Fitz fights to save the Six Duchies from without as well as from within.

The whole Farseer Trilogy is an astounding fantasy trilogy, one of the best to be written in a long time. While using many of the tropes common to fantasy, it tells a story that is unique and captivating. Told from the first-person point of view of Fitz himself, the story traces the many turbulent feelings of a young man coming of age in a world determined to ruin both him and itself. This is not an uplifting story in the sense of eucatastrophe, but it is still compelling and incredibly well-written.

The weak point of many trilogies is the middle novel, which usually exists to move the story forward toward the conclusion. Oddly enough, it is the middle of the third book that is perhaps the weakest point of this trilogy, for

continued on next page

it is there where the story bogs down a bit, caught in a holding pattern as the author brings all the characters into their proper places for the climax. But by then, the reader is so thoroughly captivated that the pacing misstep is hardly noticed.

There are many novels that I can think of that would be great for someone new to fantasy to read, but I can't think of a better trilogy than the Farseer Trilogy to get someone hooked on fantasy. The characterization is rich and full, the pacing is exquisite, and the plot is exciting and compelling.

Possible objectionable material: There are a few brief sexual encounters that cut out before becoming too intimate.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

Wizard of the Pigeons

By Megan Lindholm

Before she became wildly popular with her Farseer trilogy, written under the name of Robin Hobb (see review this issue), Megan Lindholm established herself as a fine and talented fantasy and sci-fi author. Her writings varied from the sci-fi *Alien Earth* to the standard fantasy of *The Reindeer People*. For some strange reason, though, her writing never took off in the market, even though it was always received with critical praise.

One of those early books which has garnered its own following, however, is *Wizard of the Pigeons*. The novel is part of the urban fantasy genre, which has been made more popular by the works of Charles de Lint. Back in 1986, when she wrote *Wizard*, the genre was just starting out and it was really something quite different for the day.

Wizard of the Pigeons tells the story of its title character, Wizard, a Viet Nam veteran who wanders the streets of Seattle, part of the Northwest's large vagabond population. Wizard, though, is no normal person. As one of the vagabonds of Seattle, he is in tune with the heartbeat of the city and its denizens. He is gifted with the Knowing, the skill to know the truth of things. He can be sitting on a bus, and when the Knowing moves within him, he can tell anyone on the bus what the future holds for him. But his power comes with a price. He must never have more than a dollar in his pocket, he must remain celibate, and he must feed the many pigeons of Seattle. Alongside Wizard are his fellow vagabonds Rasputin, whose body moves in an endless dance, and Cassie, who appears to others as she (and they) wish to see her.

But the fine balance of life in Seattle is jeopardized when Wizard is haunted by Mir, a grey monstrosity from his past that comes to Seattle to destroy both the city and Wizard. Before all is done, Wizard will have to look at himself in the present as well as his past and come to terms with who he is.

As an urban fantasy, *Wizard of the Pigeons* is naturally low on the standard fantasy elements. The story takes place in a contemporary urban setting—Seattle—with most of the characters being mundane (literally, 'of the world') and not cognizant of the wizards around them. The intrusion of magic into the world, however, allows the opportunity for exploring what it means to be human. In this instance, Wizard's power is jeopardized by his past and he must explore his own mistakes in order to bring equilibrium to the city again.

While greatly different from the high fantasy works for which she's more well known, Megan Lindholm's *Wizard of the Pigeons* is still a fun read and worth the effort to track down a copy. (It's been out of print in the U.S. for a while, although Voyager Books in the U.K. has just reprinted it.)

Possible objectionable material: Wizard has a sexual encounter that is mostly 'off-screen'. Some of the scenes with Mir can be a bit intense in their imagery.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

The Tawny Man Trilogy: Fool's Errand, Golden Fool, Fool's Fate

By Robin Hobb

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After Robin Hobb finished writing her first trilogy about FitzChivalry Farseer, she started into the Liveship trilogy, but she now admits that something nagged at her soul. The story of the royal assassin's apprentice wasn't finished. To ease the nagging, she decided to write a few scenes to try to bring closure. What resulted was a three-book story arc as compelling as the original.

Unless a reader has already ventured into the world of the Six Duchies, I would not recommend starting with book one of the Tawny Man trilogy. The author does a wonderful job repeating the past details, but it is intended for her fans who already know the backstory. The Tawny Man series also offers details from the Liveship trilogy as well, so a reader will get a richer experience reading both of those first.

Fool's Errand begins fifteen years after the final events of *Assassin's Quest*. Because so many of Fitz' acquaintances believed he was dead and had moved on with their lives, he chose the life of a recluse, living in a small cabin far away from the court intrigue of Buckkeep, capitol of the Six Duchies. He adopted an orphan named Hap and lived in solitude and peace with his Wit-bond friend, the wolf Nighteyes. Rather than starting off the trilogy at a gallop, Hobb fills in the gap of intervening years slowly. Old acquaintances make pilgrimages to his shack, introducing the reader to plot elements that will prevail in the story. The queen of the Six Duchies is worried about her son, Prince Dutiful, and his upcoming betrothal to the narcheska of the Out Islands, the enemies who raided the Six Duchies in the previous trilogy.

Fitz refuses all overtures to return to his old life. He is content and does not want to prod old wounds. His first love, Molly, has married his guardian, Burrich—both believing him to be dead—and are raising his daughter Nettle as well as their own children. His ability to use both the Skill magic (a magic of the mind) and the Wit (a magic connecting all living creatures) would be handy at court, for the crown prince was born with both. The Skill is reserved for the Six Duchies' kings and their coteries. The Wit, on the other hand, is a hated magic, and those who practice it are persecuted and often slain.

After weaving a bright tapestry of the context, Hobb digs in the spurs. News comes from Buckkeep that Fitz cannot turn his back on. Prince Dutiful has disappeared just before the arrival of the Out Islanders. The evidence suggests that a faction of Witted folk, called the Piebalds, has a hand in it. Fitz and his friend, the Fool, decide to make for Buckkeep. To keep their identities secret, both have disguises. The Fool masquerades as a Jamaillian nobleman named Lord Golden. Fitz dons the garb of a bodyguard and accompanies him as Tom Badgerlock. Hap will study in Buckkeep as a woodworker's apprentice while Lord Golden and Badgerlock take up residence in the keep. Nighteyes, of course, tags along as well. The pace quickens throughout the novel as they begin to unravel clues with the help of Chade, Fitz's mentor, and the Queen's huntswoman, Laurel. The clues lead them within the Six Duchies, following the Prince's trail to one of the noble houses and then deeper into the wilderness. Things get frenetic when the group finally catches up with the Piebalds who abducted the Prince. Outnumbered, they must face and outfox some of the most dangerous Witted folk in the kingdom. They soon discover that Dutiful is not being held against his will at all. The rescue of Dutiful and the resulting tension and action takes the reader through Skill-portals and back. For Fitz will not tell his nephew who he really is and the legacy of the magic they both share. In the end, friends are lost and enemies vanquished, but the costs are almost too high to bear.

In book two, *Golden Fool*, they return back to Buckkeep, bereft but victorious, in time to meet the delegation from the narcheska and the Out Islands. Fitz assumes the role of quiet mentor to the prince. He is willing to train him in using his Skill, as well as serving the needs of Queen Kettricken and Chade. It is not long after their return that they learn that not all the Piebalds were killed and that those who survived are plotting revenge against the heroes. To make matters worse, the alliance with the Out Islands is not as straightforward as everyone thought. Complications arise as the prince and the narcheska build a measure of hostility between each other. Complications also exist in Fitz' personal life, as well as the life of Hap, his foundling son. The web

of secrets and deceit comes in layers. Fitz also meets Chade's new servant, a heavyset half-wit named Thick. And it is Fitz who discovers that though half-wit he might be, Thick is also one of the strongest Skill users he has ever met. Pressure also is applied against Fitz to bring his daughter into the coterie of Skill users, but he desperately wants to shield her from the kind of life he has led. Things come to a boil in the kingdom. The Piebalds strike against Buckkeep indirectly and Fitz is at the right place at the wrong time. He is nearly killed himself as he defends one of Dutiful's friends against the Piebald leader. Because he is not recognized as part of the royal household, he nearly dies in jail before they can rescue him. Once again, Fitz nearly dies, but the combined magic of several Skill users is able to bring him back. The book thunders to an end when the narcheska demands that Dutiful complete a quest before claiming her hand in marriage. He must travel to the frigid Out Islands himself and kill the dragon Icefyre. If that is not enough, Fitz and the Fool face truths about themselves that threaten to destroy their lifelong friendship. For if the Fool goes to the Out Islands, he knows he will die there.

In the final book, *Fool's Fate*, the plots from both previous trilogies are woven together. We learn that the Fool's fate is to die in the Out Islands. Fitz arranges it so that Lord Golden cannot travel with them. The Six Duchies folk are confused by Out Islander customs and myths, especially those related to a dragon frozen in a glacier, one that is revered by the Out Islanders. The narcheska's demands clash with the customs of her own people, but who is pulling the strings? The infamous Pale Woman from the original Farseer trilogy? Or the dragon Tintaglia from the Liveship series? Despite Fitz's efforts to keep his friend away, the Fool meets them on the glacier island where Icefyre sleeps. The ending, a culmination and climax as big as the entire series, fits the pieces together at last.

Robin Hobb is one of the new masters of fantasy literature. Writing in first person can be a difficult challenge, but she never loses the voice or the setting that she has so brilliantly created for the Six Duchies. The cultures are rich and compelling, the characters human and touching, and the dilemmas and machinations they face keep you guessing. She builds the tension in layers, realistically. She makes tough decisions instead of taking the easy road of clichéd materials often ripe in sequels. The dangers they face are more elusive this time, more dangers that people in desperate situations bring on themselves. But I was pleased, after reading the entire trilogy, with the ending. I think readers who have agonized with Fitz through all six novels will be happy for him at last. Some might think the denouement is labored and slow, but just as the beginning of the trilogy started things off slowly to enhance the setting, the ending accomplishes the same effect. It is time well spent.

Possible objectionable material: one use of very strong language in Book 2 during an intense tavern-brawl. Also, there is some sexual situations in books 2 and 3, though none of it is done in an over-the-top fashion. Hobb's writing is understated, as always, but she does not shy away from human weaknesses or the circumstances that arrive from such.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

Book Review: Science Fiction
The One and the Golden Circle

By Don Allen Beene

I am honestly not sure whether this book actually fits into the category of science fiction. It read very much to me like the author's explanation of how Christianity and other world religions, evolution, science and aliens fit together to form a total picture of reality. In his Forward, Beene explains his position on some of these ideas. He presents the book as the product of his years of "enlightenment gained during astral travel." I found the themes of *The One and the Golden Circle* reminiscent of those found in *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield.

I will admit that I found the premise for this book interesting. That is, evidence of alien life can be found in our own DNA. However, I did not enjoy many elements of the story.

Blain MacBain convinces his despondent friend, Bob Macintosh, to join him on a trip to a cabin in Canada. Blain hopes that Bob will open up and explain what is troubling him. Over the course of several days, Bob does just that. He explains that several years previous, in his research on human DNA, he discovered spots on three chromosomes. These he named cenads.

After some experimentation, his team discovers that if a person is injected with an extract made from his own cenads, he is able to recall his father's entire life. Increasing the dose enables the person to recall his grandfather's life. Theoretically, a person could be gradually given doses that would take him back in time to the very beginning of life on Earth.

Blain volunteers for the project. After some physical preparation, he begins the process of regressing back in time. The story goes on to describe Blain's experiences as his various ancestors and the impact of his findings on the rest of the world.

While I thought the story's premise was promising, Beene just doesn't deliver. The writing was amateurish. The pacing ranged from a slow trickle in the beginning to a deluge of information at the conclusion. I found most of the characters unrealistic and the plot illogical at times. In addition, Beene included several graphic intimate scenes that I considered unnecessary to the plot and distasteful.

Possible objectionable material: Graphic intimate scenes.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

Deeper Magic - A collection of short stories from the first year of Deep Magic.
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Show and Tell
By Jeff Wheeler

I was charged (sadly) with the task of writing an article on the infamous line that new authors dread to hear: "show, don't tell!" While not ordinarily an advocate for blatant exhibitionism, I do agree with this advice. I mention the sadly part because I do not consider myself an expert on this topic by any stretch. Fortunately, I didn't exactly have to be one to write this article. It's one of the rare ones that wrote itself. Or will write it itself, if I can spend a few minutes transcribing some wonderful advice and tidbits. Guess I've managed to put it off long enough.

So what precisely does it mean when an author hears the dreaded words: *show, don't tell*? What do you think it means? You're probably right. I asked our editorial staff to share their pearls of wisdom. I also asked some rather celebrated fantasy authors for theirs. This resulting hodge-podge of explanation reveals a multi-faceted gem glittering in the eye-socket of modern publishing. Depending on where you're standing and what angle you are looking from, what you see may vary.

Why bore you with intros. Let's get started.

Our own **Keri Stevenson**, author of the novel *Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay* that we have been publishing, had this to say:

> I define telling as the straight-out giving of information, no mediation through a viewpoint character's mind or eyes. Showing, for me, is information filtered naturally through dialogue, thoughts, and action. There are some areas like flashbacks and character introspection that can be showing sometimes, telling others (in the amateur fantasy I've read, mostly telling).
>
> Telling:
>
> "Don't give me that, Hebroen," growled Fedorn. Hebroen shivered. He remembered when Fedorn had ascended the throne in Kala'nook. Fedorn was the third son of the King of Kala'nook, and so no one had expected him to actually gain the throne. But a judicious combination of the murder of his eldest brother, the slandering of his second, and the probable murder of his mother had insured that he was the one who ascended when his father died. With his black hair, darker eyes, and strong face, he looked the part of a warrior-king, but he was more like a hammer than anything so noble. He fell on his enemies and drove them shrieking into the night...
>
> By this point, I've lost all sense of Hebroen's personality. It could be anyone telling me this information, and it wouldn't make any difference. I want showing to be firmly rooted in the character's personality and worldview.
>
> That's the way I handle it in my own writing. I'd put in details the character might notice, such as comparing Fedorn to someone else he's known, and include the viewpoint character's emotions about Fedorn's ascension to the throne. I'd also try to wait to tell the full story. It would sound more natural later in the plot, not in a huge lump up-front. Of course, I have the advantage of usually writing novels and so having more plot to work them into. It's harder with a short story, but I think that the writer should work until he or she can trim the plot and use only the most necessary details. Is it really going to make any difference to a short story if the reader knows how Fedorn ascended the throne? If not, just cut it out.

It's good advice, but it also reveals a delicate balance. Some information will need to be told to the reader, for the sake of brevity. Not everything should be shown. But how do you tell the difference? Fantasy author **Cecilia Dart-Thornton** offered this advice to us about maintaining the balance between showing and telling:

> Fortunately, I knew nothing about it when I wrote The Bitterbynde Trilogy. I consider this fortunate, because at that time I was writing from my heart, without knowing any of the rules; merely directed by instinct. In hindsight I think my work was the better for this lawless sincerity. This is not to say that writing without conscious recognition of rules suits everyone. It happened to work for me, probably because I had already internalised a lot of writing rules without realising I had done so. I use intuition to guide me all the time, and if I wish to "tell" something and suddenly remember I am supposed to "show" it, I would feel like a bird with its wings clipped. The solution probably lies in being aware of rules but not being afraid to break them if the occasion demands.

This is not the first time you'll see the word "instinct" in this article. In fact, here it is again by our staff editor, the young doctor-to-be and horror master himself, **Usman Tanveer Malik**:

> I guess in the end, a lot of it is instinct and an eye for catching a writer's techniques and skills while reading his works. I learned a lot from reading King, Lovecraft, Tolkien, Clive Barker...above all (at least these days), I'm reading Ramsey Campbell. Those of you who haven't read him should. I have yet to encounter a writer who writes horror fantasy more poetically than he does. And while you read him, you notice how he shows and tells. At times he combines the two, so that the ambience becomes superb.

Writing is just that, isn't it? A subtle weaving of thoughts and impressions that manage to transform words into experiences shared with a reader. If there was a simple equation to make this happen (plot + cool characters / sum of the GDP of Thailand = great novel) then maybe we could patent the formula and become insanely rich. I think **David Farland**, author of the *Runelords* series, did a pretty fantastic job attempting to put this into words:

> Typically, the advice "show, don't tell" means that we should depict a scene dramatically rather than just report what happened in description. Thus, rather than tell us that "Joe was so upset about getting fired, he went home and beat his wife," the audience would typically like to see a depiction of what happened when Joe got home. How did he tell his wife that he got fired? Did she demean him for it? Did he stop at the bar before going home? When he hit her, did he draw blood? Was she injured for life, killed? Did the cops come, or did her lover crash through the door and rescue her?
>
> However, "showing" is more than just relaying what happened to whom and in what order. Basically, when we give that advice, what we really want is for the author to TRANSPORT the audience, to move them physically, intellectually, and emotionally out of their seat until they are no longer aware that they are sitting in a room reading. In other words, we want to create the scene, and let it unravel second by second, so that we can savor it.
>
> Telling, rather than showing, is good advice in many cases. If nothing happened on Sunday, then we don't really want a twenty-page account of how nothing happened.

Do you understand the point David is making here? That the others have hinted at? It is transporting the reader from their reality to a new one. Not every author is successful at this,

and perhaps it is because they do not trust their readers enough. Many have the scene so vividly in their minds, they want to paint every nuance, every raised eyebrow (guilty as charged!), rather than letting the readers imagination fill in the scene. The inscrutable **M. Thomas** had this to say on the topic:

> "Telling," "info-dumps," and "backstory" often go hand in hand, and I think that's where a lot of new writers run into trouble. It's a little like being cured of a dangerous addiction -- first you have to know what it is and what it looks like, then you have to acknowledge that you have it, then you have to accept the cure. The best place to begin this process is in a workshop or writing group, in my opinion. But eventually you have to work toward being conscious of it yourself.
>
> I once got a crit with a comment that stuck with me about this. Basically it said that telling and info-dumping indicate you don't trust your reader to be an intelligent enough human being to know what you're saying, and if they spot that in your writing, suspect that they're being patronized by the writer, they may not go on to read. I've seen that repeated in articles since, and it's something I always keep in mind because the last thing I want to do is treat my reader like an idiot.
>
> One thing I see a lot is an author who has managed to move pretty well away from info dumping in prose, but then switches over to the dreaded "As you know, Bob" in dialogue. This is my personal peeve -- a character telling another character something that the author wants the reader to know, but that the other character already knows and doesn't need to be told. That's an easy little trap to fall into though, because one of the cures for telling and info-dumping is said to be using dialogue and character interaction to relay what has come before. Then people follow this advice and end up "As you know, Bob-ing" all over the page.
>
> On a micro level, I always look for "felt" in my own writing. "Felt" is one of those words that for me, personally, indicates telling. Other people don't mind an author telling them what emotions their character is experiencing, and I don't always mind when I read it, but one of the challenges I set myself is to at least attempt to show an emotion before I resort to telling it. Love, nervousness, anger, frustration, fear, hate, kindness, friendship all come with little mannerisms and facial expressions that can be relayed in words (which is a lot like what David Farland said). When I read the work of really good writers, those who manipulate the language incredibly well AND tell a good story, I always notice the writing is fairly free of "He felt, she felt" and yet I find I've judged the character's emotions well enough just from the behavior described.

This article is turning out to be a veritable potpourri of good advice, isn't it? The points that M brings out are so true – and I've found the compelling urge to bring a weed whacker into my next manuscript to eliminate all the pesky "he felts" and "she felts." The truth hurts, I'm afraid, but then we heal and move on. Using words like that can dilute the power of a story – or so says **Kristen Britain**, author of the *Green Rider* series.

> Showing, not telling, means to me putting the reader right into the boots of the characters, making them feel what the characters feel; creating an experience for the reader by using the senses, dialogue, and action. There is certainly a place for "telling", but this is where craft comes in, that instinct of the writer to know how much is too much. "Telling" can be very seductive because it provides a shortcut for the writer, but it can also dilute the power of the story.

You mean authors can be seduced? It's true! Seduced into taking an easier path through a thorny chapter. Seduced into using a cliché instead of brainstorming a witty piece of dialogue. But authors are often blind to their own writing sins. How does one look at their own work

objectively, to find those places where telling could be improved? Another member of our staff, **J.W. Wrenn**, had this to say:

> It takes practice, and time. But two things that I have found to be helpful, and Keri alluded to, are READING and EVALUATING. Read the authors you like, but on those workshops you are at, when you read the story make a mental note to yourself. If too much is being shown or told, note: how, when, where and why- look at what the character was supposedly doing, or where the character was or what was going on around the character that caused too much of this show. Also note when the writer did it right. When did you read it and think - *wow what a great story*-- that usually indicates a good balance of telling/showing. And see how it was done, look at the techniques. Was there dialogue that broke up the monotony of the telling? Did something odd happen like the listening character become so surprised that she dropped her tea cup? Did the character move from action to thought and begin an informative telling?
>
> Do this for a while, and as you write you'll likely begin to see it in your own writing. You'll be writing along and then go- I'm doing way too much telling, then think about it, and maybe think, hmmm... if I insert some action here then I could do this and.... Then you'll be on your way. But don't become overly burdened about show vs. tell. It's not (often) what makes or breaks a story.

I think the next example does a brilliant job of weaving together all the threads we have been discussing. The next example, by the famous **Robin Hobb**, sums it up nicely in a little writing sermon that should make a convert out of anyone:

> I think the only way to explain this writing precept is to 'show, don't tell'.
>
> Telling: I got on the bus. It started up right away. It was very crowded and smelled bad. There wasn't an empty seat, so I had to stand for fifteen minutes until I reached my stop.
>
> Showing: The lurch of the # 59 bus sent me staggering into a whiskery man who enjoyed both cigars and sardines but eschewed deodorant. I grabbed the back of a seat to right myself. Beside me in the crowded aisle, a sticky little girl waved her lollipop as she conducted herself through six repetitions of the alphabet song, one for every two blocks we traveled.
>
> If your protagonist is performing a simple action, try substituting sensory information rather than simply telling the action.
>
> Instead of : I sat down in an old arm chair.
> The upholstery on the armchair was worn and slightly greasy.
>
> Instead of: I ate some clam chowder.
> My teeth grated on a bit of sand in one of the clams in the chowder.
>
> Instead of: I ordered a hot dog from a street vendor. It wasn't properly cooked.
> I found the cold spot in the half-cooked wiener I bought from a street vendor.
>
> "Showing' can also be tasting, feeling, smelling, hearing or touching. Use sensory data to put your reader into your story rather than telling him what he can see outside the window of words.

Did I mention that this article really has been writing itself? All of these thoughts and insights are useful. If I were to add my own two cents to the equation (I can do that since I'm writing this and get the final word after all), I would like to add one more thought and something

I've tried to do.

Writing fantasy stories is more difficult than people think. It's all make-believe anyway, right? What can be so hard? Creating new worlds is easy. Developing interesting plots is a snap. Most of the authors I know are a walking beehive of thoughts and ideas constantly filling the mind with commotion and energy. Many of us write the kinds of stories we like to read. But the challenge comes in trying to get an audience to understand that beehive. For someone who lives with the buzzing character voices, honeycomb network of plot ideas, and the sweet sugary moments that make the work worthwhile, we see the whole, the complexity, the interconnections.

"And the little boy clipping the hedges? He'll show up in book five to slay the wizard Sgorammak. And did you notice how the Knights of Cripplestook all salute with their left hand? It's because the High King sneezed during the coronation and they all blessed his grace at the same time. And…and…and…!"

My problem is that I am already excited about the worlds I'm creating. I see the brilliance of it all, the epic-in-the-making, the glorious finish in book twelve when it will all come together perfectly. Or so I hope! And yet how do I engage the reader in the first book so that they will want to see what happens next? How do I read my own writing without all the intellectual and emotional baggage of that beehive?

For me, the answer is time and distance. When I finish a story, or a novel, I like to set it down. Put it away. Shelve it on the hard-drive for a while. I then work on something else, something to distract the beehive and focus my energies on something else. Then when I look at it again, I try to push what I know out the window and read it as if I were looking at it for the first time. Sometimes I can pull it off. There is something immensely satisfying when you do not exactly remember what's going to happen next. Or when a few lines of dialogue jump out at you with their vividness because you don't remember having written them. That is when I know it's working.

The longer I've been at this addictive hobby called writing, the more I believe it's really all about the characters filling the stage. Perhaps it's all the books I've read. Or all the ones I put down without finishing. If the characters were not interesting enough to engage me, so that I believed I was floating along beside them, it did not matter how richly woven, how colorfully painted, or how twisty the plot was.

And doesn't Ms. Hobb make it look so easy?

The Geek's Guide to Grammar
The Passive Voice

One very common critique in writing involves the Passive Voice. Have you ever been told to get rid of the passive and make your sentence active? Has it ever annoyed you? I want to give a quick-and-dirty about the Passive Voice.

Let's begin with a definition, provided by fellow Geek, Matthew Winslow:

> I had someone the other day tell me that the phrase 'he was running' was passive. Is it? Let's look at how to construct the passive voice by using this sample sentence: `Bob the Baker slayed the dragon.` This is an active voice sentence since the subject (Bob the Baker) is doing the action (slaying). To make it a passive, you take the object of the action (the thing being acted upon, viz., the dragon) and make it the subject. The sentence then pretty much rewrites itself: `The dragon was slain by Bob the Baker.` (Yes, there's quite a lengthy explanation about passive participles, but that's more than this Geek is ready to dive into.) We can then see that 'he was running' is not passive because the subject ('he') is actually doing the action ('running')! (For the curious, this verb type is known as the progressive aspect.)

First, let me say that I, for one, don't have much of an issue with the passive voice. In many cases, you *should* use passive. One primary occasion is when you want to emphasize *what* has happened rather than *who* did it. `In the end, the Dragon was finally slain by the White Knight.` See? Maybe you don't really care who killed the Dragon, you just want people to know it happened. So if that's the case, use the passive! Another good example is when you don't know who did whatever it was that happened. `The Magistrate was killed in his sleep.` Once again—fine to use the passive.

So why the big backlash against the Passive Voice? Well, it is in large part an issue of engaging the reader. You want your hero to act, not to be acted upon. `Frodo saved all of Middle Earth.` not `Middle Earth was saved by Frodo.` Nothing really wrong with either, but Frodo is the hero, so let's make him the active force in the sentence.

Passive does really well in research, reporting, and other areas where you are looking for a sense of objectivity. In reporting, for example, people are first interested in what happened, than in who did it. `Thirty people were killed today by a masked man who`… You get the idea. Fiction, however, is different. You want the reader to make a connection with your hero(s). They don't care that the Princess was saved. They care that the young knight out to prove himself overcame the odds and saved the Princess. See the difference?

Let me reiterate, before you go out and wipe from existence any evidence of the passive voice in your writing, that there is nothing inherently wrong with using the passive voice. And some times you have to. But when you're writing your next great novel, try to pay attention to the focus of your sentences. Could those passives be more active, and in the process engage your reader a little more?

Ask the Geek

Do you have a grammar question for The Geek? This is the place to ask. Simply send an email, and he'll respond. Be prepared, because your question may be printed in a future issue.
EMAIL THE GEEK

```
It was a little after sunset when the peace of the small
 hamlet was interrupted by fight between two patrons of the
tavern.

It was a little after sunset when two tavern patrons
shattered the calm of the small hamlet with a brawl that
left the place in ruins.
```

Aside from the horrid writing, can you see the difference between those two sentences? Both are ok (from a technical standpoint), but the second one emphasizes the two patrons and their fight. It draws (hopefully) the attention of the readers to them. Of course, if the fight is not important and you want to emphasize the now-shattered peace that ruled before the fight broke out, then just forget what I said and keep plugging away with the passive!

continued from Issue 24

Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay

By Keri Stevenson

Part One of the Orlathian Trilogy

Chapter Fifty-Five
In Passing Hours

"The privileges and luxuries of rank are the price we earn for the price we pay: living by the Cycle and Destiny and the will of Elle, and protecting those who are too weak to do so and know nothing of these weighty matters. There is nothing that says we cannot enjoy luxury."
—Princess Leeana of Rivendon.

Emmeldra looked around the Great Hall wistfully, for the fourth time. She knew all too well that Hanir wasn't there and was brooding in his room, but still, it would have been nice to be able to doubt her mind and look up to see him striding through the well-wishers, come himself to wish her well.

Oh, well. She had enough people here, all of them willing to congratulate her and wish her luck in her resolve to look for Lightflower.

Emmeldra drew a deep breath to quell the fluttering of her heart. She would find him. But there were some things that she had to do first. She could feel the beginnings of prophecy stirring in her heart, the feeling of absolute certainty that her mother had told her about so many times. She knew that what she was doing was right, and that Destiny and Elle and the Cycle approved.

He looked up at her and after a moment of staring said with the unconcerned directness of youth, "You're the Princess Emmeldra, aren't you?"

There was nothing more wonderful.

With a faint smile, she turned back to the refugees from Corlinth, who regarded her with awed eyes and were still too bashful to approach. But one of them was coming to meet her now, a child with beautiful gold-flecked violet eyes and an amazing aura of Destiny. Emmeldra was happy that part of his Destiny had been to make it to the castle alive. He would gladden many hearts in the coming days; she knew it.

He looked up at her and after a moment of staring said with the unconcerned directness of youth, "You're the Princess Emmeldra, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"I met your brother."

Emmeldra's smile deepened. "Prince Hanir or Prince Leroth?"

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shadows far beyond. How large was the monastery? How many monuments? How long before the monks-

"Excuse me, my lady."

Ciara turned her head with a haughty flick. "Yes?"

The second monk quickly crossed to stand in front of her. "The uncleansed are not permitted deeper into the monastery."

Ciara stared at him. "Of course." She turned and walked briskly back to the door, exiting the monastery and returning to the bright sunshine outside. In the barren, dusty courtyard, a few villagers gathered, their arms laden with clothing and fowl, alms to be given to the monks. Ciara strode through the iron gates and onto the forest path toward the village.

Ciara knew the monks were lying about Saint Fianche. She had good evidence that Fianche of Malitane was entombed in the monastery of the Order of the Forgotten. She had hoped the monks would welcome pilgrims and would show her the tomb, but they didn't seem inclined to show anyone the monument. That was disappointing, and it was going to make her job later much more difficult.

Ciara didn't follow the road all the way to the village. She detoured, taking a side path into a thinly wooded area, until she reached a crumbling stone building where she had stored all of her things. She unearthed her bag from under a fall of ivy, quickly changed from her noble silks to the more comfortable traveler's garb of a tunic, pants and hooded cloak, and stored her bag away again. If the monks wouldn't help her, maybe the townspeople would. They must have some stories of Fianche's tomb. She'd get the information she needed – even if she had to loosen their tongues a little first.

* * *

The local pub was crowded and roaring, full of light, laughter, and music. Ciara had already bought several drinks and, within minutes, began another round. She hoped she would get some real information soon. People of her trade didn't carry a lot of gold.

Tales she wanted, and tales she was getting. She had barely uttered the words "Fianche of Malitane" before the villagers were off.

"Oh, she was a lovely lady," said one older gentleman. "Even in her older years, before she died."

"Bah," said a second, a dirt-streaked miner with shaggy whiskers. "She didn' die. She went up into the hills 'n never returned. The monks 'sumed she died, so they set up a monument."

"Aye, you're right she didn't die," a third said, waving his ale mug so that some of the liquor sloshed out. Ciara had a suspicion he had been drunk before she had arrived. "She wasn't 'uman, so she couldn't die! She was an angel and flew to 'eaven when 'er work was done."

"Nah, she died all right," said the first. "But the sisters of her order came in the night and stole away her body. Monks don't want to admit it; shows they weren't watching."

The miner protested, and the drunk started talking over him, until all three of them were shouting and arguing. Ciara, thoroughly disgusted, grabbed two full ale mugs and walked away.

Taking the only other empty seat at the bar, Ciara sank down next to a silent, staring man. She slid over one of the ales, even though the old man was already nursing a mug.

"I'm told the great saint Fianche of Malitane is immortalized in the monastery here,"

Ciara said, her patience thin. If the man didn't know anything, she wasn't going to waste a second drink on him.

The old, wrinkled man looked at her, at the ale she had pushed over, then back to her. "Aye," he said slowly. "Saw her myself, I did."

Ciara felt a thrill of excitement, but she decided it best to keep her incredibility. "You did?"

"In my boyhood," the man said. "My friends had dared me to sneak into the monastery at night. We're not allowed in at night, you see, not even for emergencies. It's strictly forbidden."

"I didn't know that," Ciara said. Her mind briefly flickered to the benevolent-looking monks and the possibilities of rituals they kept at night, away from the eyes of the villagers.

"Aye. Well, my friends dared me to spend an hour in there after dark. We all went to the gate together. I didn't think the gates would be unlocked, or I wouldn't have gone. But they were, and I couldn't back down in front of my friends, so I walked into the darkness."

He took a swig of his ale. Some trickled down into his beard. "Oh, the things I saw that night. Things awful and wonderful and few I'd dare to repeat." He shuddered. "Demons and goblins and spirits and the like."

Ciara nodded, her eyebrows drawn together skeptically.

"Makes me wonder what those monks do during the night," the villager said, grunting to himself. He seemed lost in his memories.

"Saint Fianche," Ciara prodded.

"Aye. Well, after I had spent eternities running around, I found a wall and stuck close to it. That wall was covered with monuments. I looked at few of them, but I remember stopping by Saint Fianche's because it was dead fancy. The monks suddenly appeared by me soon after and chased me out." He wiped his brow with a soiled handkerchief. "I've never been in the place since."

"So you remember how to get to the tomb?"

"Eh, it was in the main hall, but that room's dead big, especially in the dark. But I think if you follow the wall to your left when you walk in, you should find it."

Ciara smiled. "Thank you." She put some gold on the counter. "Buy yourself another ale."

She stood to leave when the old man stopped her.

"What reasons you got for wanting to know about Saint Fianche?"

Ciara smiled again. "Purely sentimental ones."

* * *

Sneaking into the monastery was easy enough. Ciara had found that nobody minded her getting into their business; it was getting out of it elegantly that was more difficult. She climbed up the crumbling stone wall, flung herself over it, and sprinted across the deserted courtyard. She edged around the building, left of the main entrance, looking for a small window. She didn't find a window, but she did stumble across a wooden door. She pressed her ear against it. Hearing nothing, Ciara gently prodded it open a crack with her fingertip and glanced inside. It was dark and silent. She opened the door farther and ducked inside, crouching down as she shut the door behind her.

The room appeared to be a kitchen, with a large fire pit in the center and a hole in the low roof for the smoke to pass through. Wooden tables lined most of the walls, broken by a large

basin and towers of dirty dishes. To Ciara's left, a floor-to-ceiling lattice framework was stacked with wine bottles.

Ciara crept across the kitchen to a small archway in the opposite wall. She peered cautiously into the vast chamber beyond. The double-arched pillars continued as far as she could see into the gloom, brightened here and there by scattered torches. Ciara glanced to the right. She could just see the rough hewn double doors of the main entrance, so if she continued to the left she should eventually come across Fianche's tomb.

The walls were brightly lit by torches. Ciara sprinted past a few pillars to skulk in their shadows. The monastery appeared to be empty. She didn't know where the monks were.

A low growl reached Ciara's ears. She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes widening. Not far behind, a massive wolf-dog padded closer, hair bristling, teeth bared, and eyes glowing yellow.

Ciara swore softly and tried to drift out of the dog's line of sight, sliding around pillars. The growling noise only grew louder. As Ciara searched frantically for alternate ideas, the monster dog howled and fell on her like a heavy weight. Ciara was flung forward, crushed beneath the dog. She struggled against it, but the dog was too massive. The beast snarled, and Ciara felt hot breath against her back and smelled the odor of decayed flesh.

He was pawing at her back, his claws digging into her skin. Ciara choked back a cry as she felt blood ooze out on her back. She struggled to reach the knife strapped to her side. Slipping it free, she threw all her weight to one side and rolled onto her back. Ciara slashed at the dog's face as she turned, and the beast shrieked again, leaping away from her. Ciara pushed herself to her feet, trying to ignore the fire in her back, and readied herself to stab again. But the beast was running away, moaning plaintively.

Ciara looked in disgust at her bloodied knife. She wiped it on her pant leg hastily and sheathed it. Her back was hot with pain. Gingerly, she brushed her fingers against her shoulders. In some places her tunic was slashed through, and she could feel the wounds and blood beneath. They didn't seem to be deep, though, and Ciara hastily brushed her fingertips against her tunic and began jogging, her eyes glued to the wall as she passed by scores of decorative statues and tombs. No doubt the beast was limping back to his master, and she didn't know how long it would take the monks to track her down.

The flickering torchlights made her jump at shadows, and Ciara continually skirted in and out of the cover of the pillars. She had just begun to feel at ease, the burning in her back cooling, when she heard the rumble of voices. In front of her, two fiery figures shone through the shadows. She ducked down behind a pillar, and pressed her back against the cool stone. Her breath caught. The smoldering shapes were coming closer, the harsh murmur of their voices louder. Ciara's palms slid against the pillar as she bit her tongue against her panic.

"-monks," one was saying, the voice deep and grating. "They never follow orders."

The voice was so deep it was almost inaudible. A burning smell reached Ciara's nose. She opened her mouth, trying to breathe through it shallowly and silently.

The other laughed, deep and grating. "They'll get what's coming to them."

"Not soon enough," the first said. "We gave them too much to begin with."

There was a clacking noise, like a hollow laugh, and the sound of wind.

"When'd the place get infested with ghosts?" the first voice said. Ciara could see a play of red light against the pillars, and then a flash of green. She slumped down lower.

"As if the humans weren't enough," the other grumbled.

The burning smell grew overpowering, and Ciara felt a gust of heat blow against her face. She shivered in spite of the heat and wiggled around the pillar some, hoping that she would be passed by unnoticed. The sound of heavy footsteps came and went, and the hollow clacking noise with it. She peeked around the pillar.

Two hunched, distorted figures ringed in flame were stumping away, a green shade swimming in the air around them. Ciara bit her tongue against the sight of the demons. She made to back away, but the ghost snaked around and stopped short, its molten eyes fixed on her. Ciara froze. The ghost started to scream.

One of the demons muttered something.

"Stop your infernal screaming!" the other shouted, thrusting out an arm the size of a tree trunk. "Tsallen vop!"

The shade blurred into a green mist. The demons grumbled together as they continued. Ciara crept around the large pillar and then burst into a sprint. Come beast, bird, or man. Against supernatural beings she had no power.

No power and no luck, either. Ghosts were lonely creatures, but often banded together in their own kinds. The one dispelled by the demons apparently had a pair, and as Ciara ran past a pillar, she was as unfortunate to find herself face to face with it.

The emerald shade stared for a minute, blinking empty eyes, and then it screamed, its voice an unearthly high pitch. Ciara spun around and kept running.

"Sallen vop," Ciara said through gasps for breath. "Tzallen vop, tsallem vop."

The sound of rushing wind told her the ghost was following her. Spinning on her heel, Ciara threw out the palm of her hand as the shade reached its clawed hands out for her.

"Tsallen vop!" Ciara said.

The shade froze, suspended and floating in the air in front of her. Its glazed, misty eyes looked at her in confusion. Ciara wiped a drop of sweat from her forehead as she smiled.

A minute passed, the shade staring at her furiously, and Ciara found she felt uneasy turning her back on the ghost. Who knew when the spell would be released. Ciara scrutinized the shade.

"Tsallen vop" she said again cautiously, waving her hand in front of it.

The shade began to dissipate, little tendrils of emerald light breezing out of it. A look of horror crossed the shade's face before it became too blurred to distinguish any of its features. Within a few seconds, all that remained was a dim cloud of green mist. Ciara turned and ran.

She kept her eyes fixed to the wall as she sprinted down the length of the monastery. Stupid dog, noisy shade. She was surprised that something hadn't descended upon her, demons or monks. She had to hurry. Sooner or later the ax was going to fall.

Ciara skidded to a halt, almost tripping when she spotted the tomb, about to pass it. She took a deep breath, trying to slow her racing heart, stepped closer to it, and examined it up and down.

The monument was magnificent, a masterpiece of marble and semiprecious stones with gold and silver trimming. The casket itself was raised upon six short pillars so that it was eye-level to Ciara. The pillars and tomb were carved with vines and flowers, and a sheet of marble rose behind it, emblazed in silver and gold with astrological signs. A statue of an angel watched over Saint Fianche, a harp in her hands and her mouth open to sing an ode to the deceased woman. The tomb was fit for royalty. Ciara eyed some of the gems, brushing them with the tips of her fingers, but then clenched her fist. She hadn't come for the monument itself.

Ciara traced the edges of the casket, looking for a small deformity in the perfection of the

tomb. Her fingers found it, a tiny lump of marble that hadn't been smoothed down, underneath the right corner of the casket. Ciara pushed it, straining to get the little bump to move. It finally yielded and slid up into the bottom of the casket.

Ciara glanced around. Still no one was in sight.

Next she reached up on the monument, stepping carefully on the vines of the carved pillars. Ciara grabbed for the angel's hands, balancing precariously, and strained to touch the harp. The strings were spun silver and playable. Ciara plucked the strings slowly in a tune she had learned long ago from a dying woman in the hills of L'Eldridge.

The soft strains drifted down from the harp in a sweet but ghostly melody. When Ciara had finished drawing the last note, she let go of the angel's hands and jumped back down to the stone floor, waiting.

There was a sucking noise, and swirls of white mist began to gather in front of the monument. Ciara hurriedly pulled her hood over her face, lowering her head in hopes that the cowl would create a shadow. There was a sigh and a yawn, and Ciara raised her eyes to see, floating in front of her, the head of Fianche of Malitane, her face lined with wrinkles and her hair haphazardly swept back.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" asked the spirit irritably.

"I've come for the artifact you have buried with you," Ciara said lowly.

Fianche, who had looked disengaged before, was now piqued with interest. "Oh, you're not one of those bothersome monks. Who are you?"

"A treasure hunter," Ciara said dismissively.

"You're young for your type of work," Fianche said.

"A saint like you would know?" Ciara thrust out her right hand, palm upturned. "Give me the staff."

Fianche eyed her warily. "You may have known the secrets of my monument, but that doesn't guarantee that you receive the prize. You won't have the staff until I know who you are."

Ciara grabbed her hood and yanked it off, eyes set imperiously on Fianche and her chin jutted out in defiance. The ghost gasped and jerked back a little.

"Surprised you didn't see me in the afterworld?" Ciara said smugly, enjoying the look of shock on Fianche's pale features.

"How are you here?" Fianche asked in wonder, her voice dripping with disdain.

"Sometimes the poor are more saintly than the frauds they follow," Ciara said.

Fianche glared for a minute and then, to Ciara's surprise, burst out laughing.

"Give me the staff," Ciara said over her peals.

"No," Fianche said, gloating. "You're unworthy."

"Give me the staff, you treacherous witch!" Ciara said.

The ghostly face contorted into a smirk. "You can't have it."

"I'll tear your monument apart," Ciara said.

Fianche just laughed again, deep and throaty.

Ciara ripped the medallion from the thong around her throat. She jumped up on top of the casket, Fianche quieting to watch her with sudden suspicious interest. Ciara took the medallion and thrust it into the angel's mouth. She slid down again, staring expectantly at the statue. The face appeared like stone, but then the angel turned her head and smiled down at Ciara. Ciara took a step back at the gaze of flat stone eyes.

"This girl has the emblem," the angel said. When she talked a melody of notes came forth, not just one pitch, so that she spoke music instead of words.

Fianche scowled. "It's just an imitation. She couldn't have the real thing."

The angel's head turned again, the movement fast and abrupt. She frowned down at Fianche. "You are trying to deny her her right."

"She has no right to my staff," Fianche insisted.

"She knew the casket's secret, the harp's song, the medallion's purpose," the angel said. "She took all the clues you left."

Fianche's eyes fixed on Ciara in a chilling stare. "I never meant for her to find the clues."

"You're just angry that I'm still alive," Ciara said smugly. "You had always prayed for my death because I was a smear on your reputation."

Fianche smiled wickedly. "It's not easy being a saint."

"Enough!" the angel said loudly, her voice crescendoing. "The girl shall have the staff."

Fianche started to protest, but the angel sang over her, her fingers jerking at the harp. Ciara backed away a step, again glancing around her for signs of the monks. She was sure the music was echoing through the entire building.

The casket lid slid to the side, and the angel fell silent, the last chords still humming in the air. The angel looked at Ciara expectantly. Fianche glared.

"Go ahead," Fianche said, her voice goading. "Take it from my fingers if you dare."

Ciara hesitated, and then stepped forward, again climbing up the monument. She tried not to look at the stretched out skeleton of Fianche. Instead she stared at the staff laid next to the lady, a long, straight, unimpressive shaft of dark red wood, glossy even after being entombed. She reached down, pried it out of Fianche's fingers, then jumped down from the tomb, sliding her hands over the staff and getting the feel of its weight and balance.

"Go in peace," the angel said, and the casket lid grated back into place. The angel froze in its original position, as still and immovable as if it were only made of stone. There was a clink of metal against stone as the medallion fell to the floor. Ciara stooped to pick it up and fastened it around her neck again before she turned her gaze back to the staff, admiring its simple, unobtrusive elegance.

"That staff was never meant for you," Fianche said.

"It was meant for the one who could reclaim it," Ciara said. "It's not like you have much use for it now anyways." She turned from the tomb and Fianche's floating head, twirling the artifact in her hand. "I wish you peace and longevity in the afterlife, Mother. Perhaps I shall join you one day – but not soon."

"Why don't you join me now?" Fianche said, her voice ringing with outrage. Ciara hesitated at the feeling in her voice, and in that second, Fianche began to scream.

"Intruder in the monastery!" the dead woman shrieked. "She's going to poison the purity of this chamber! Monks, I call on you to cleanse my monument immediately."

What the bloodied watch dog and noisy shade had not brought, Fianche summoned forth at a moment's whim. From the shadows that danced around Ciara three monks emerged, garbed in robes of red with rods of pointed metal in their hands. Ciara could see an unearthly red glint in their eyes. She positioned her back to the wall, balancing the staff in her hands as they approached slowly, their eyes boring into her.

The one directly in front of Ciara had a long beard and shaggy hair. She recognized him as the monk she had encountered earlier .

Ciara tried not to eye the pointed shafts with too much trepidation. "I am rightfully here," she said. She never minded trying the reasonable approach, even though so far no one had ever been interested in talking reasonably. "I am the heir to this artifact, and I have come to claim

it."

The monks did not falter. "Saint Fianche had no heir."

"I was kept hidden," Ciara said. "I am her daughter."

"She lies," cried Fianche.

"Slanderers against the forgotten must perish," one monk grunted.

There was a murmur of assent, and the three converged on Ciara in a rush. The three spikes dove for her stomach, but Ciara jerked her staff around and swung it to the side, knocking one monk on the head and parrying the other two blows away from her. As the monks stumbled, surprised to be caught off balance, Ciara seized her chance. She ran.

A chorus of enraged shouts followed her, and Ciara cast a glance over her shoulder to see the three monks waving their arms and yelling. She grinned at them. Easily done. Her months training with Count Sallender had not been wasted after all.

Her smile faded as she turned her head back around.

Four monks stood, baring her path, long swords unsheathed and held at the ready. Ciara skidded to a halt, casting anxious glances down the row of hard, steely faces. Her eyes flickered down to the staff in her hands. She hoped fervently that its legendary powers weren't just made up myth.

"Give back the staff," one of the monks said.

Ciara shook her head. "I have claimed the staff; it is mine."

"Then join the forgotten!" the monk cried, raising his sword above his head as he ran at her.

Ciara raised the staff to parry, sweeping it to the left as his sword curved down. The impact was sharp and jarring but not damaging. Ciara snapped the staff to the right, thrusting away the sword and catching the monk's nose on the swipe. His head snapped back, blood spouting from his broken nose. She kicked him in the stomach and he crumpled to the ground. Ciara grinned as she turned back to the three remaining monks.

The second was already upon her, not waiting to see her challenging grin. The monk slammed down his sword, Ciara barely being able to get the staff up to parry it in time. Ciara felt the staff slip to her fingertips with the force of the monk's slash. Then the pressure was gone and there was the sound of metallic rain. The monk's sword had shattered, the blade fracturing to a thousand pieces. There was a moment of silence as the monk stared at Ciara in shock, and then Ciara spun the staff and smacked it across his skull. The man's eyes rolled, and he dropped to the floor, unconscious.

The two other monks glanced at each other in confusion, and Ciara took advantage of their hesitation to sprint past them. As she retreated, she heard their yelled curses, the only things following in pursuit.

The run back seemed much longer than she thought it should have been. In the middle, when she started gasping for breaths, a burst of white light erupted from somewhere within the monastery, and the sound of screaming chased her the rest of the way, increasing her panic.

Ciara's lungs were burning when she finally reached the small kitchen she had entered through. A chorus of surprised exclamations greeted her as she stumbled through the doorway, pushed her way past perplexed and outraged cooks, and burst from the kitchen into the paling night. She crossed the courtyard, went over the low wall, and into the concealing darkness of the forest, slipping farther and farther away from the monastery and the shrieks and screams that resonated from within.

* * *

Most of the night's drunks had long been forced from the tavern, and as the dawn rose, the only people seated at the counter were travelers and men trying to shake off the night's sickness with a hot drink. Ciara stared at them all idly in turn as she hastily ate her hot breakfast, wondering about each of them and amusing herself with stories she made up about their lives. The old man seated next to her apparently had no qualms about staring back. Ciara blinked at him, remembering him from the other night, doubting that he remembered her.

He shifted in his seat, raising his mug to his mouth. "Ye be a woman traveling alone?"

Ciara nodded. "I have been for many years now."

"It isn't safe," he said, disapproval in his voice.

"I've never been harmed," Ciara replied ambivalently. "Angels protect me." She fingered the medallion around her neck.

The man's eyes fell to the floor beside her where her bundle and staff lay. "That's a beautiful piece of craftsmanship," he said, grudging the compliment.

"Thank you," Ciara replied. "It was a gift from my mother."

The man glanced at her sharply. "She encourages ye to wander unprotected?"

"Oh no. She's passed away."

The man's gaze softened. "My apologies. May her soul rest in peace."

"Yes," Ciara agreed, trying to keep her voice solemn. "May her soul rest in peace."

The End

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Dalian's face. "Then do not fight me, my Gar. You know that your cause is not just."

Dalian shook his head sadly at this request. "My feelings in this matter are irrelevant, Cerebos. My honour too has been sworn. My sword and my skills are pledged in the King's name. I cannot and will not be swayed by personal considerations."

Cerebos would have also been surprised by any other answer. Still, he tried one more time to avoid the inevitable. "Your oath was given to a fine man, a worthy King. But that man is long dead, lost in the mists of madness. Does this not give you the right to reassess your allegiance?"

Again, Dalian shook his head, a rueful smile tugging at his lips. "Honour cannot be put on like a cloak in the winter and discarded when summer comes once more. Honour is a second skin. Only death can remove it. Do you not remember my teachings?"

Nothing that Gar-Dalian had taught Cerebos had been forgotten, every lesson a keepsake to be treasured. Words surfaced now from memory.

"*To the man of honour a promise can bind more firmly than any chains, imprison one more securely than the strongest gaol.*"

The poignancy of these words struck Cerebos for the first time. Neither man would back away from his sworn cause and, as a result, they would fight. They did not wish it so, but it could not be avoided. Cerebos could not put from his mind the thought that he would die. The number of times he had engaged Gar-Dalian in spar stretched into the hundreds, but Cerebos had not bested his teacher once. Not a single victory in all those years. He was stronger now of course, more skilled. Yet still the doubt was there, nagging. As if reading his mind Gar-Dalian spoke. "There will be no quarter given Vin-Cerebos. This fight can only end in death."

Cerebos saluted once more, agreeing to the terms. "If I win your men will leave?"

"They will. Vin-Laskos is a good officer. He will see my orders carried out."

With no words left to say the two men readied themselves for combat. Both declined to wear a helmet, preferring additional visibility to the extra protection. As Gar-Dalian pulled on his mail tunic, Cerebos gathered his round shield, settling it comfortably on his arm. Links of silver chain stitched to the leather breastplates jingled as the two men moved toward each other. Swords rasped free of their sheaths as the two knights saluted. Shields raised protectively, the two men circled warily, each studying the movements of his opponent. Gar-Dalian launched the first attack, his sword clanging against the steel boss of Cerebos' shield. The clash of steel reverberated around the courtyard as Cerebos' answering lunge met Dalian's parry. Again the two men backed away, circling, wary for any opening.

* * *

From a narrow window of the monastery Melaxa watched while swords were raised in her name. A gasp of fear escaped her pursed lips when Vin-Cerebos was sent reeling backward, following a clash of shields. Beside her, Brother Halias fretted and fussed, urging her to leave the window and not look. The kindly monk had argued her case with the abbot after Vin-Cerebos had brought her, seeking sanctuary. Both of them knew that the King would respect no ecclesiastical barriers in reclaiming his fifteen-year-old bride, but the gesture itself meant much to her. She refused to step away from the window, causing Halias to grunt in frustration. Outside a man risked his life for her virtue, and she would watch every second of the contest. If he won, she would rejoice in every blow struck to secure her freedom. If he lost, she would honour his every

move in her memory. Either way, she would watch until the end.

* * *

Vin-Cerebos launched a series of lightning strokes at his adversary, attempting to break down Gar-Dalian's defences. Feinting low he spun, sword looping up and over. Gar-Dalian's blade was there to meet it, as ever, turning the blow aside with a riposte of his own. Cerebos was forced backward again, links of mail parting as the tip of the sword swept across his midriff. Pressing the momentary advantage, Dalian stepped forward, sword swinging. A desperate series of blocks with both sword and shield kept Vin-Cerebos alive, blood running down his cheek from one close strike. The momentum of the attack carried the two men across the courtyard. Cerebos could sense the monastery wall closing in on him. Fearing that he would become trapped, he resorted to a risky manoeuvre. Only perfect timing would see it succeed. At Dalian's next high stroke Cerebos neglected to parry. Instead, he tucked his chin to his chest and ducked. As the sword whistled over his head he dropped his left shoulder, ramming his shield against that of Dalian's. Using momentum rather than strength, he forced the older man away. Both men steadied themselves, breath coming in gasps as sweat began to sheen their faces.

* * *

Melaxa's despairing cry had brought Brother Halias to her side at the window. Her slim hand knotted in the fabric of his cassock as she watched her protector narrowly avoid disaster. For a few silent seconds the two warriors stared at each other before the chime of steel once more accompanied their attempts to penetrate each other's defence. Unlike his youthful charge, Halias was aware of the relationship between the two combatants. Vin-Cerebos had voiced his fears to the sympathetic monk. Now, as he reluctantly watched them fight, it seemed to Halias that the relationship had been set aside. In the heat of battle the identity of the opponent had been submerged. Only the need to find the killing stroke, the perfect manoeuvre, remained. Not until one of the two had fallen would the true tragedy be realized.

* * *

For both warriors, the world had narrowed to the cramped confines of the monastery courtyard. The shouts of the soldiers, the heat of the beating sun and the ache of tired limbs were all ignored. Concentration focused only on the movements of the opponent; all else was closed out. Once more Vin-Cerebos pressed the older man, pitting the stamina of youth against the experience of age. Launching a flurry of cuts to Dalian's shielded left side concentrated his attention on defence. With a speed and fluidity born only of devoted practice Cerebos spun on his heel, turning full circle to hammer a backhand blow at Dalian's unprotected head. Any man of lesser skill would have succumbed to the lethal swipe. Most would not have possessed the reflexes necessary to block the blow. Those few that did would still have been stunned, opened up to any following strike.

Gar-Dalian was the exception. He saw the sword hammering towards his face but made no attempt to parry it. Instead he let his legs collapse, dropping to his knees so the sword slice unopposed through the air. Now it was Cerebos who was suddenly exposed to danger. The momentum of his strike left him off balance as Dalian's raised sword speared towards his

exposed stomach. Twisting his body desperately aside, he thrust his shield towards the blade, forcing it away. The wild acrobatics saved his life, yet the sword still found a mark, biting across the muscle of his left thigh. Spinning away to face the rising figure of Gar-Dalian he felt the warm flow of blood soaking the leather of his leggings. While neither deep nor painful, the cut would still hamper his movement. The longer the contest lasted, the more the muscle would stiffen, reducing his chances of victory.

* * *

A cheer rose from the watching soldiers as Vin-Cerebos limped away from the strike. Vin-Laskos did not join in the cheering. Like Brother Halias, he understood the full implications of this duel. He also knew that Gar-Dalian despised the King's actions towards the Lady Melaxa. Laskos shared his feelings. Unlike Gar-Dalian, however, he would not let his honour trap him into a course of action he disagreed with. Win or lose, he intended to resign from the King's service upon his return. Gar-Dalian would disapprove, of course, but in his own mind Laskos' decision was made. He could not follow a code of honour that led to such rigid stupidity.

* * *

Once more the words of Gar-Dalian's teachings rose to the surface of Vin-Cerebos' mind.

"*Your attacks must contain the unexpected. Do not allow your strokes to form a pattern which your opponent can read. Always you must keep him off balance, uncertain of the nature or direction of your next blow"*

Any manoeuvre that would surprise the wily old swordsman would have to be unexpected indeed. As Gar-Dalian approached, Cerebos channelled his desperation into one of the most audacious moves he had ever executed. Stepping forward to meet the challenge, he launched his shield towards Gar-Dalian's head. Instinctively, the other man threw his own shield up in defence, sword ready to parry the inevitable riposte towards his exposed ribs. The blades met, steel scraping, but rather than check back for another strike, Cerebos carried his momentum forward, slamming a shoulder into Dalian's chest. Caught by surprise for the first time, the older man was rocked back, struggling to retain his balance. Cerebos pressed forward, spinning a two-handed blow towards his staggering opponent. This time, Gar-Dalian could neither block nor avoid. Cerebos' sword struck him high on the left arm, driving through the light mail and leather of his jerkin, to bite through the flesh and muscle. The shield dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers as Dalian was knocked from his feet. Rolling across the dirt courtyard, he rose to his knees in time to block Cerebos' follow-up, left arm hanging at his side, blood dripping from the slack fingers. Turning aside a flurry of attacks, Gar-Dalian managed to regain his feet, breath exploding from his mouth in a series of short gasps. Vin-Cerebos' attempts to finish the contest were unsuccessful. He was forced to disengage, both men pausing for a second time.

* * *

Melaxa's nails dug crescent grooves in Brother Halias' wrist. Her heart beat like a fist against her ribs as Vin-Cerebos' sword struck his opponent. For the first time in the contest,

it seemed he could match the skill of Gar-Dalian. The faint glimmer of a hope held in check threatened to burst into flame when the King's champion was knocked from his feet. Thoughts of victory were quashed as Gar-Dalian refused to succumb to his disadvantage. A wide sweeping slash at Vin-Cerebos' knees forced the younger man to leap awkwardly. Before he could return to the attack, Gar-Dalian was back on his feet, chest heaving with effort. Brother Halias clutched his cross, uttering prayers, while the two wounded swordsmen gathered their breath for a fresh onslaught.

* * *

Pride warred with the pain of his wounded arm as Gar-Dalian raised his sword in a salute to Vin-Cerebos. Never had anyone come so close to matching him in single combat. That the one to do so was not only one of his own pupils, but Cerebos himself, gave him great pleasure. A warrior had to live always with the knowledge that sooner or later he would meet one of superior skill. If Vin-Cerebos claimed his life, then Gar-Dalian would go to his grave satisfied. He would not go easily, however. He beckoned Vin-Cerebos forward, wrapping the numbed fingers of his left hand around the hilt of his dagger.

Returning the salute, the younger swordsman limped forward, knowing in his heart that the duel would end soon. Neither man possessed the strength for a prolonged fight. Blood loss and exhaustion would see a victor emerge from the next few engagements. The two blades crossed, touching briefly in a sign of respect, before launching fresh assaults. It was Vin-Cerebos who forced the issue now, hammering at his old tutor's guard. The swords spun and crashed against each other as Vin-Cerebos tried to forge an opening; denied time and again by Gar-Dalian's faultless skill. The older man continued to deflect Vin-Cerebos' attacks without raising any of his own in reply. He was content to wait, knowing that such a concerted attack would inevitably create an opening. A mistimed stroke, an error in judgement or a momentary loss of balance; any slip could present him with the chance to strike. When that chance came he would be ready, for he knew that it would be the last chance he would get. As if to highlight the thought Vin-Cerebos stumbled, injured leg betraying him. To keep his balance he was forced to throw his sword arm out, leaving his body unprotected. The striking snake of Gar-Dalian's blade immediately arrowed toward his opponent's chest, the full weight of his solid frame behind the thrust.

* * *

When it finally came, the end was so unexpectedly swift that it caught those watching by surprise, unsure of what had happened. Melaxa saw Vin-Cerebos stumble and the back of her hand rose to her mouth to stifle a cry as Gar-Dalian's blade sprang for his unprotected chest. Then the two men were in each other's arms, a final embrace, as one of the swords dropped to the earth. The two warriors locked eyes, faces close enough that their breath mingled in the air. Both faces told a story of pain. In addition one held an undercurrent of anguish and grief, while the other displayed pride. Melaxa tore herself from Brother Halias' grip, running toward the courtyard.

* * *

Gar-Dalian clutched his old student to him, both arms thrown around Vin-Cerebos, though the effort of moving his injured left, fingers locked around the haft of his dagger, had brought terrible pain. Pain now eclipsed by the fire burning in his stomach, and highlighted by the ragged edge to his speech. "A clever move, Cerebos. You fought well. Never have I faced such an able opponent."

Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth as his head slumped forward to rest on Vin-Cerebos' shoulder. Tears blurred Cerebos' vision, dampening Gar-Dalian's hair as they dripped. The older man's arms dropped to his sides and Cerebos let him fall to the ground, his sword sliding free of Dalian's body to drop beside him in the dust. Cerebos held himself straight, forcing his own agony behind a mask of calm, as Vin-Laskos strode forward. Cerebos kept his knees locked, carefully facing the other soldier while Laskos spoke. "This is a sad day, Vin-Cerebos, and I grieve that I was here to see it. Gar-Dalian's word will be honoured. We will return to the King. But be warned. He will not let the matter rest here."

Pausing only to stare sadly at the face of his fallen Gar, Vin-Laskos turned on his heel and walked away, his soldiers falling in behind him. They were silent save for the tramp of their boots as they marched.

Vin-Cerebos too stared at the face of a man he had loved, hardly able to believe that he was dead. There had been no sense of triumph as his faked stumble had fooled Gar-Dalian into lunging forward. No pleasure in his own skill as he pivoted towards his opponent, knocking aside the threatening blade with his forearm, his own sword meeting the solid resistance of flesh. Footsteps hurried toward him as dropped to the ground beside the man he had killed, no longer able to ignore the pain of Gar-Dalian's final strike.

* * *

Melaxa burst from the cloisters in time to watch the soldiers leave. With Halias at her side, she cried out once more, hurrying to Cerebos' side as he collapsed to his knees beside the body of his tutor. She gripped his hands in her own .His face deathly pale, Cerebos stared into the compassionate depths of her ocean-blue eyes, smiling as he addressed the monk. "I would ask two favours of you Brother Halias. Take the Lady Melaxa far from here. The King will not honour my father's bargain."

Brother Halias nodded in agreement, his hands resting on Melaxa's shoulders as the full realization of the tragedy she had witnessed sent a tremor through her.

"Before you leave I would also ask that you see me buried at my father's side. We will be together in death as we could not be in life."

Vin-Cerebos' gaze rose to the monk's face to see that his request was granted before letting his eyes close. Melaxa held tight to his hands as he folded into her arms, the hilt of Gar-Dalian's dagger rising from his back like an accusation. Brother Halias comforted her while she wept over the tragic figure of her protector.

The End

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on the first document. "I'll go see the group, and I'll tell them you sent me."

I took the paper, folded it twice and slipped it into my vest. Now that his work was complete, the go-between scuttled out of the pub as fast as he could without looking awkward.

I grinned after him, showing a row of fangs to the disheveled occupants of the place. Nearly all were looking at me—I could tell, despite their attempts to look unconcerned with my presence. Maybe it was just the plasma weapon hanging from my waist, or my six-and-a-half feet of height, but some of them probably recognized my jet-black eyes. I swept a long glance over each table. All were clearly visible to me even in the dim light—I could see the heat of each being's body, the glow of warmth flowing from their chairs, mugs and drinks.

Then I snapped my head around and walked into the street. The outpour of tension as I left was almost audible.

My potential employers were staying in the good part of town—if any district in this bog could be called good. It wasn't even worthy of a name— there were a few unofficial names floating around, though most just called it Settlement Five. Alliance government here consisted of a legate who spent most of his time sealed up in a concrete bunker with only a tiny garrison of marines to protect him from the city outside. Now and then, they would emerge—in full combat kit—to put into action some edict from the planetary governor, and that not often. No one cared about Settlement Five, and its inhabitants cared about no one. I didn't intend to stay there any longer than I had to. That human had been right—I needed the money, badly.

That was why I pounded on the steel plated door of the best hotel in the city—which was saying very little. A small peephole slid open. "What do you want?" the landlord croaked.

"Have you got a being staying in there name Jexos Gaveral? A human?"

"What's it to you?"

He did. If Gaveral wasn't there, he would have told me so. I told him that unless he opened the door, I would blow it down.

He capitulated after that. I wouldn't really have done it—waste of a good shot—but sometimes a bluff will get you farther than a truth or even a well-constructed lie. Lying wasn't my way of doing things.

The landlord, a squat reptile, showed me up a flight of creaking steps and into a second floor that was slightly better constructed than the first. Here, they at least painted it, and there were a few pieces of smeared canvas passed off as art. The reptilian landlord approached one of the doors and rapped on it. "Come in."

The landlord opened it and waved me in, then scuttled away. I supposed that he suspected me of wanting to assassinate his guest, and wanted it to happen as quietly and with as little damage to his property as possible.

The room was fairly good—better than a lot I had stayed in, and a paradise compared to my current dwelling. The furnishings were dirty and cheap, but at least some of them were made of real wood and padded. The human was sitting with perfect posture, a book spread open on the ground beside him. It was a hunting manual. He was young—not more than thirty-five, I guessed—with a clean face and well groomed hair. His dress was casual yet gaudy, like most Alliance stuff. "You sent out a notice requesting guides and bodyguards?" I said.

"I did. Who might you be?"

"Jalazar Flinteye."

"You will recall that I asked for only the best. Do you have any credentials?"

I grinned, and heat flashed into his face as he tried to suppress his fear. I was the one with the plasma, while his weapon was leaning in a corner several feet away. "You don't recognize my

name?"

Not many Alliance people did, and this one was no different. "In my line of work, one has to go mainly by reputation. My transactions don't come with invoices. You'll just have to trust me when I say that I'm probably the best gun around here—probably the only being worth 50,000 SEUs."

Gaveral looked me over carefully. A ragged vest and short pants cut off at the knee were my only garments, along with the belt that contained my dagger and gun—the rest was bare fur, smooth and deep gold in color. His eye lingered for a moment on my claws before moving up to my face—faintly feline, but with a flatter snout and only small holes for ears. His eyes came back up to look into mine, black as the darkness between stars.

Then he sank back into his chair, wearing an expression of deep consideration, his eyes moving between my weapons and my face. "All right, Flinteye. You're hired, on the condition that you accept payment after the job is done. That will give you some incentive to keep us all alive."

"Right. Hired any others? I could tell you if they're worth having."

"My hiring decisions are my own, thank you. You just show up here at six standard tomorrow morning, and then we'll head out together."

Swinging my tail lazily behind, I left him. Gaveral's expression was hard to read—it could be that he already regretted hiring me.

I arrived on time the next morning, with everything I'd need for the job. They were gathering right in front of the inn—the three Alliance people and a few others—probably guards. Two of these were unremarkable, beings who could walk and shoot plasma, but not well. I knew the third, a mammal with big, curved horns. "Jalazar!" he bellowed, spreading his arms in greeting. "I knew you were in the sector, but I didn't think I'd meet you here. Something wrong with your ship?"

"I need some money. They're giving it. What about you, Borja?"

He grinned, showing a row of heavy blunt teeth. "They picked me up on the way—the price was too high to turn down."

I went up to the Alliance beings and presented myself. All three were human—Gaveral, an older one, and a female. Perhaps a family, but I couldn't tell with my limited knowledge of human appearance.

Gaveral nodded. "So you're here, Flinteye. This is my uncle, Baron Renod Trel, and my cousin, Lana Trel."

The older one, the Baron, spoke. "Greetings. I can see that you're prepared for action. I assume that the game is worth the trouble?"

I told him that the "game" was dangerous, if that was his meaning. He nodded sternly.

Already I was beginning to regret this, even with the promise of 50,000 SEUs. I saw the girl's clothes—ankle length cloak, delicate shoes, jewels—and I had to strain not to laugh. She'd be feeling pretty uncomfortable in a few hours.

I had gone to my ship's armory, one of the few parts that wasn't damaged in some way, and equipped myself to deal with anything that we might meet out there. I hadn't forgotten the other job I had been offered either—we might encounter more than beasts once through the town gates. I had a suit of gleaming chromeel armor, a brace of heavy plasma pistols on my hips, grenades, my dagger, a small holdout pistol for emergencies, an ammunition belt, and a few miscellaneous devices. One of my eyes had a digital targeter hovering above it.

Asi XII's hot sun was just coming up over the mountains that overlooked Settlement Five, and my employers were anxious to be off. Gaveral, the Baron, and the female all went in front, with the two other mercenaries a little behind, and Borja and I in the rear. "This doesn't seem quite like your line of work, Jalazar. Shouldn't you be off chasing bounties?" he said.

"It won't be boring—you know that as well as I."

He wouldn't be sporting all that gear if he didn't—Borja was almost as heavily armed and armored as I was. He tilted his horns first to one side then to the other—as close to a shrug as his species got.

No one bothered our party on the way out—most low-lifes avoided all Alliance beings, especially ones with Jalazar Flinteye and Borja Hornhead as bodyguards. We reached the walls without incident. The only purpose of them was to keep animals out—if any invaders wanted Settlement Five, they could have it, and the Alliance wouldn't lose anything. As if anyone would invade Asi XII.

The Alliance beings had a truck and several porters waiting at the gate—slightly less scruffy locals, mostly. There were a couple who looked like Alliance servants in the mix. Also, the Baron and Gaveral had a mammalian riding beast each. Gaveral told me that the lady would ride in the truck, the porters would run behind, and Borja, the two others, and I would pick our ground—anywhere, as long as we stayed in close proximity to the truck and covered the party completely. Gaveral instructed us not to open fire unless an imminent threat was presented and the Baron or he were not present to deal with it. We were a security measure, nothing more.

I could have said a lot to him about that, as our party rumbled through the gates, but I refrained.

This part of Asi XII was coated in thick temperate forests all over—tall hardwood trees with trunks meters thick stretched above a floor that was carpeted with smaller trees, mosses, and ferns. A wet mist clung to the ground, beginning to fade as the sun rose higher and beams of light slanted through the canopy. The woods were so thick that we lost sight of Settlement Five within a minute of entering.

Gaveral rode in the lead, clutching an ornate plasma rifle, obviously looking for the slightest opportunity to shoot something. The porters trekked doggedly behind, with the truck churning through the brush at their heels. Borja was near the front, the two other guards in the rear, and I walked alongside the truck.

The Baron fell back to ride alongside the truck. He glanced at me and dismissed me irritably. I went back a few feet, but not so far that I couldn't hear whatever was said. The Baron took no notice of me after that—it seems like most nobles, especially Alliance ones, are under the impression that servants, bodyguards, and mercenaries are close to deaf. "How is it, Lana?"

We had been out of the gates for fifteen minutes at most, and already he was asking that. I managed to keep my amused hiss quiet enough not to attract notice. "It's very bumpy and hot, father, but I'm alright."

She must either have had several layers on or have been very delicate towards temperature—probably both. I felt comfortable, and I was wearing full armor with clothes and fur beneath. And if she thought it was bumpy now, she wouldn't like it later on.

"I hope to get my first taste of game today—Borja informed me that the fauna here will come right up to the city walls," said Baron Trel, "So be ready. It might a little frightening, but

Gaveral and I won't let it get near you."

More likely, I thought, your Alliance-made weapons will only irritate it, and Borja and I will have to blow it to bone-shards. This time I growled aloud, and the Baron glanced back at me. "Is something wrong, you?"

I shook my head. He raised one eyebrow and turned back to his daughter, speaking more quietly this time. But I could still hear him.

"Watch that big cat, Lana. I'm not sure why Gaveral hired him. If he tries to hurt you, give a cry, and we'll come help you."

"Father! I'm sure he's harmless...well, I mean he's not planning to hurt us."

The Baron dropped his voice a little lower yet, but my ears were well attuned to it by now. "Don't be so sure about that. I have reason to believe that some crime boss has a bounty out for our heads. That...Flinteye. He seems like just the sort who might take such a job. I don't like his looks, and I'd like to know what a warrior with his apparent skill is doing on a slum world like this. Just be careful, Lana. Use that pistol I gave you if you have to."

The girl nodded and said, "I will, father."

Then she ducked her white face back into the truck, and Baron Trel urged his beast somewhat forward. He aimed one last look over his shoulder at me, his stern eyes filled with suspicion. I almost bared my fangs at him, but managed to control myself until he turned away. Then I both displayed my teeth and let a low growl roll in my throat.

Gaveral and the female were talking cheerfully in loud voices when I barked out an order for silence. Gaveral glared at me, the Baron glared harder, the lady looked puzzled, and Borja said, "What, Jalazar?"

I spoke to him, not the others—he had the most sense of any. "Can't you feel it, Borja?"

He followed my gaze up to the treetops, turning his horned head in slow arcs. "I can feel—something. I don't know what. It could be harmless, Jalazar."

He and I kept looking up at the canopy. The Baron gave a loud snort. "Explain yourselves. What is it?"

I didn't have time to answer. Suddenly the canopy began to thrash, and through it dropped something enormous and black. My pistols were out and pumping out hot blue bolts before it hit the ground, perhaps a hundred feet away from the truck. It was an enormous arachnid, covered in ragged, leathery skin. It charged towards the truck, clacking its mandibles wildly.

The porters stood paralyzed with fear. The Baron and Gaveral immediately snapped their rifles up and opened fire. The Baron howled, "You, there! Cease fire!"

I might as well have. My pistols weren't doing any lethal damage, even though they were some of the most powerful available on or off the market. I unclipped a grenade and put my claw over the primer switch. The beast was crashing closer, fangs dripping venom and multi-faceted eyes rolling wildly. "No, Jalazar! Hold!"

That was Borja's voice. I hesitated. If it had been one of the Alliances, I would have thrown the grenade regardless. But Borja I respected.

Something cracked off to my side, and fire blossomed in a perfect mushroom shape on the beast's abdomen. It roared, thrashing its muscular legs wildly. Another shot from Borja's gun, and it skidded to a halt a few feet in front of me, leaving a deep furrow in the ground. It chittered once, almost sighing, and then died.

Borja moved up to stand beside me. "How did you know where to shoot it?" I hissed.

He nodded his horns to the sides. "I just studied this planet's fauna more than you did, Jalazar. They keep their brains in their bellies."

Gaveral and his uncle rode up on their beasts to survey the kill. Baron Trel was livid. "I told you, both of you, that we were to make the kills!"

"It would have massacred every one of us before your weapons killed it, Alliance," I growled.

He didn't like that particular noun, and might have tried to shoot me if Gaveral hadn't interposed himself between us. "Flinteye! Careful how you speak. And Uncle, they were trying to defend Lana and the others."

Then he spoke to Borja. "I am most thankful, sir. My uncle and I were unprepared for that particular creature—I trust you will apprise us of its anatomy, so that we will be more ready next time."

I got no thanks—only Gaveral's reprimand and the continued anger of the Baron. I glared at him, and then stalked away.

Gaveral seemed to have accepted Borja as an advisor, and Borja said that fires would do more good than harm, so we had them. He and I were sitting on opposite sides of one, roasting pieces of the arachnid's torso on our dagger points.

We talked for a while about the past, of adventures on worlds far away, in and out of Alliance space. I had teamed with Borja a couple of times before, and the results had always been profitable. Then, inevitably, our conversation turned to the job at hand. "Now they seem to think I'm an uncontrollable beast—as likely to tear their throats out as I am to protect them."

"Not all of them, Jalazar. I was speaking with the female, and she seems to think that you're very courageous—even if she's terrified of you. Of course, when I was talking with the others that was the impression I got."

I grunted, and Borja continued. "Gaveral is cautious—he knows that you're a tough fighter, but he does think that you're very dangerous. He told me to keep my weapon trained on you at all times, and to blast you if necessary. As for the Baron, I think you know well enough what he thinks."

It went on like that for a few minutes. But still, after we had eaten the sour meat and lain down on our cots, I thought that I should have made an exception and taken the kill job—I would have made more money and had a lot more fun doing it.

We stayed encamped the next day so Gaveral and Baron Trel could go out hunting with Borja and one of the other guards. They left me in camp and took the female with them, so I wouldn't be tempted to kill her. Those among the servants who had guns kept them loose, along with the remaining guard, a scrawny reptile—they had probably been given orders to shoot if I so much as drew my gun for cleaning. I sat on a log, eating ration bars when I got hungry and thinking for nearly the entire day.

I was in a nasty mood when they returned, the porters they had taken with them hauling several animal carcasses. They had brought down one big hard-shelled reptile, a few small but sharp mammals, and another arachnid, this one smaller. I could tell from the wounds that they had been brought down by well placed Alliance rifle shots, no doubt directed precisely by Borja. Gaveral was talking animatedly with him, and theBaron Trel was adding to the conversation periodically. He scowled when he saw me, as if disappointed that his other employees had not been given any opportunity to shoot me. They kept talking for some time, with many suspicious

glances and gestures aimed toward me.

The shelled reptile made better eating than the others, and so they butchered that one, keeping its great shell as a trophy in the cargo area of their truck. There was enough meat for the three Alliance, all the many porters, Borja and two other guards, and even a little left over for me. I took my meat off to the side and devoured it in private, too angry to talk even with Borja. I spread my cot some ways away from the rest. None of them, Alliance or otherwise, missed my presence, and I was too far to overhear their conversation.

After that, they followed a pattern of marching one day, hunting the next, and feasting on the meat of their kills. I was fed and allowed to stick around, but the Alliances didn't speak to me, and I never came along on the hunts. Gaveral seemed to remain cautiously civil at first, but after a while he started to look at me with the same expression as the Baron. Sometimes, Borja said a few words to me, but I wasn't in any mood to hear them. They would have sent me back to the town if they weren't afraid of retribution from the barbaric Flinteye. It was only the promise of the 50,000 SEUs they would give up to be rid of me that kept me tramping along with them.

Borja sat down beside my little fire one night, and without waiting for a greeting, he said, "Having a bad trip, Jalazar?"

I just growled, showing my fangs. He nodded his big horned head. "I can talk to the Alliances. Ask them to take you on the next hunt. You can show them how you are with plasma."

"Most likely I'd wreck their next trophy, or wreck the brush a bit too much for their sensitive palates. I think they'd push me over a murderous edge."

"Perhaps, but you won't get any better unless you show that you deserve it."

"Like you have?"

I fixed him with both eyes, full on. My infrared was especially clear, but I could tell from the heat in his chest that he was nervous. Borja knew how angry I was, and might even be a bit scared for himself. I looked back into the fire. "All right, Borja. Go have a talk with your Alliance friends."

He nodded his head. "Good, Jalazar."

Borja was about to rise when a piercing howl split the night air. I was on my feet in a second, snapping a pistol from its holster. Borja followed me a moment behind. "I know that cry," he growled. "Saverats."

I locked my targeter over my left eye and looked around. It was a high quality device—compact, yet with a color display, a synchronized targeting system currently locked with the pistol that was in my hand, and other things. Through it, and with less accuracy through my other eye, I could see things coming toward us in the brush. Sleek, dark red things, with mandibles full of sharp fangs.

I put a plasma shot right through one, and it died easy enough. The resulting thrum and flash of light was enough to further alarm the Alliances and their servants. "Borja! What's going on?" came Gaveral's voice.

Borja had his own sidearm out—he had left his rifle back at the truck—and was firing at the oncoming rush of beasts. "Get your weapons! We're being attacked!"

The beasts were baying and howling, and the Alliances could hear that well enough. As Borja and I fought, side by side, we retreated slowly backwards. The beasts were only about three feet long each, but there were a lot of them—too many for us alone. I laid down a tight curtain of plasma, keeping an eye on the charge meter, but it wasn't enough to hold them all

back. Borja's was using a compact slug gun, so he missed more often then I did and didn't put out as much firepower. Then they began to flow around us, increasing in volume until we could only keep an island round ourselves, not hold back the entire sea. I heard gunshots behind us, felt their heat and saw their flashes. I smelled burning flesh, but the beasts kept coming at us, each loosing a predatory roar of its own.

We were backed up almost to the Alliances and their shots were flying past our sides when the charges on my pistols gave out within a few shots of each other. Before I could reload, two of the red beasts hit my chest. My pistols fell, and I fell with them, allowing the creatures to bear me down. I caught myself on one hand, while my other drew my dagger. The beasts couldn't do more to my armor than scratch it, but my throat was a different matter. I slashed both theirs open as their jaws snapped at mine. They slid off me, dead.

I looked up and saw that I was within the perimeter formed by the Alliances and the armed ones. With me gone, they were flagging. The red beasts had slashed a few of the porters up badly, and Gaveral had a small gash across his shoulder. I snapped the ammo chamber on one of my pistols open, letting the dagger fall to the ground so that I could get a charge pack off my bandolier and slip it in. Then I saw motion off to my right, and snapped my head back in that direction. The female was standing with her back to the truck, white faced and shaking. Above her, tensed to spring, were two of the beasts, their fangs glinting in the light of the Alliances' fire.

I seized my dagger and ran as they pounced. The lady screamed when she saw me coming. I slashed one beast down as it flew through the air, forcing her aside. The other had its flank cut open a moment later. The two carcasses hit the ground.

The Alliance female kept screaming as I turned towards her holding my bloody dagger. She hadn't even seen me cut the two beasts down. "Father! Gaveral! Borja! Help!"

A moment later, I felt a stun slug hammer into my back.

I woke up with a tingling in all my limbs. My chromeel armor was still there, but my weapons and targeter were all gone, and my hands and feet were lashed to stakes in the ground. A little after I first opened my eyes, I saw the barrel of a rifle thrust toward me. "Don't move, you. Lie still."

It was one of the guards, the reptile. His weapon looked like a slug-thrower—crude, but enough to kill me easily. I growled, which was probably a bad idea. He shoved the gun a little closer to my face. "Lord Gaveral! He's awake!"

A moment later Borja, Gaveral, and Trel were all standing over me. Gaveral was the first to speak. "Flinteye, last night you attacked my cousin. Why?"

I remembered my anger, and it all came roaring back. I strained at my ropes, snapping my teeth. "Jalazar! Calm yourself!" snapped Borja.

I did, but my chest was still heaving. "I killed two of those things. They were about to jump her, and I slashed them with my dagger."

The Baron spoke. His eyes had something like triumph in them. "That's not what Lana says. She says you rushed at her with a knife, missed on your first slash, and were about to try again when Borja shot you."

I showed my fangs to Borja. "So you did it, eh? Good shot—right in my back."

Trel drew his pistol and pointed it at my face, to join the reptile's slug thrower. "You are in little position to throw insults, mercenary. Shut your mouth—the next shot that hits you won't be a stunner."

"And what should we do with you, Flinteye?" said Gaveral, easing his uncle aside. "You certainly can't stay with us, and we can't just let you walk off—that would be too dangerous. What do you say, Borja? Perhaps we could take him with us in captivity and turn him in to Alliance authorities?"

"There are probably a lot of bounties on his head," said Baron Trel and snorted.

I was too angry to argue further. I just closed my eyes, clenched my teeth, and let my chest rock, struggling to avoid roaring out the rage I felt. I heard Borja's voice: "I agree. Jalazar...is sometimes unpredictable. But he is my friend, or once was. I suggest turning him loose without weapons, and a warning that we will not hesitate to shoot him if he returns."

I didn't listen to the rest of the conversation. At last, I felt a foot kicking my side. "Calm yourself, mercenary, and I'll cut you loose."

Gaveral did, while four guns covered me. He let me get to my feet, rubbing at sore wrists, and then said, "Get out of here. You'll have to survive on your own—no food or weapons. If you come back for any reason, we'll kill you."

My black eyes flicked up to the four covering me. The Baron, the two guards, and Borja. I didn't even try to find any sympathy in my one-time compatriot's face.

I looked at Gaveral. "Go on," he said. "Move; or I'll shoot you myself."

He placed a warning hand on his pistol. But before he could draw it, I grabbed his shoulders, pressed him against my chest, and placed him between myself and my guards. In another quick movement, his pistol was in my hand. "Don't shoot, or this one dies."

I let the pistol barrel hover near his ear. My other arm clamped itself around the Alliance's arms—he hadn't realized how strong I was until that moment. The Baron let out a bellow of rage. "How dare you! I swear I'll kill you myself someday!"

"Don't vow anything you might not be able to do, Alliance," I snarled. "Why don't you bring me my weapons and a card with 25,000 SEUs on it?"

"What! We will give you nothing. You do not deserve any pay. Someday, the Alliance will have you in its prisons."

"Not yet it won't. We're about at your turning back point—I've been with you for half the journey, so I'll take half my pay. Get me those weapons, and the money, or your nephew here might not keep his brains much longer."

Seething, his face bright red, the Baron started to tell one of the guards to do it. "No. I want you to do it," I told him.

He stomped off, cursing. Gaveral was stiff with terror. The two guards had lowered their blasters a little, unsure of what to do. Borja was still aiming his into my face. "I can shoot faster than you, Borja. Drop the weapon. You two as well."

"Jalazar, don't do this. I'll kill you if I can."

"Only if you beat Trel and Gaveral to it. Now drop it. I can probably shoot you too, after I've taken care of this one."

Borja scowled and let his pistol fall the ground. After a moment of consideration, so did the other guards. The good Baron returned a moment later with what I had requested. "All right. Slip the SEU card into the belt pouch, and then come here and put it all on me. Drop your weapon first. I've got the same threat to stop you from trying to disarm me," I growled, poking Gaveral's head with the pistol.

The Baron was so angry he looked like he would burst. He hadn't so far, so hopefully he'd control himself until I was gone. In a minute, during which he kept up a constant stream of curses, my weapons belt was on, along with my ammunition and my targeter. I told the Baron to

back away, and for once he obeyed without comment.

"Farewell, Borja. And you too, Alliances," I said.

I threw Gaveral forward, towards Borja, then turned and ran into the forest. "Shoot him! Shoot him!" screamed the Baron.

But by the time plasma and slugs had started to fly, I was hidden in the depths of the bush.

I didn't think they would have bothered to pursue me, but I scrambled into the lower branches of a tree and waited there for a few hours anyway. I had woken up at mid-morning. When the sun had gotten an hour past its zenith, I descended. My aching belly reminded me that I hadn't gotten any ration bars—my weapons and 25,000 SEUs, but nothing more.

I considered my course of action. I didn't doubt that I could forge my way back to the city in a few days, living off of raw meat if I had to. But it would be dangerous. I would still have to get through without being eaten by a giant arachnid or torn to pieces by a pack of those red beasts. Or I could follow them, which would be equally dangerous—Borja would shoot me, past partnerships aside. I was the faster gun, but it wasn't something I wanted to test. I needed food and water, though—and the Alliance camp would be the best place to steal them, in the darkness of the night. It would probably be best to raid their camp, steal enough food to get back to Settlement Five without hunting, and then go.

I checked my pistols. No one had bothered to load them, so I snapped a new charge into place on each one. Then I reached into my pouch, saw that there were indeed 25,000 SEUs on the card, and set off, following the Alliances. They would be heading back the next dawn anyway—I might as well shadow them for some protection from the local fauna. I only had to retrace my steps for a little while before I found the campsite where I had been tied up. There were still a few carcasses lying scattered about, but a mound of fresh dirt showed that they had dug a grave for the rest. The Alliances weren't hard to follow, with their truck and army of porters. I moved at a quick lope, to close the distance that separated us as quickly as possible.

The afternoon dragged on, and I grew hot, with no canteen to relieve my thirst. I kept running, looking forward to the promise of stolen food and water once night fell and I caught up with them. I also made sure that my hearing was always sharp—it would not be good if I were to stumble upon them, or come close enough for outlying guards to see me. They would be cautious—the Baron probably thought I was out to kill them and would slit their throats as they slept if given the chance. It was an idea, but it wouldn't gain me anything, and I had sobered enough so that bloody revenge was at least distasteful.

The sun was beginning its descent and darkening. My legs were aching furiously and my chest was heaving, stretching the tightly knit plates of my armor in and out. But there, ahead, I could hear voices—it sounded like the Baron, obviously very angry. Perhaps he had decided to take his anger out on Borja, now that I was gone, or maybe he was mad about me being gone—it was hard to tell with that one.

The voices were only a few feet away—I climbed up a tree to get a better view, and listened: "The Alliance authorities will miss us if we're not back at the scheduled time!"

Then Borja's voice: "You left word with them, then? I'm afraid that on this world, they're terrified of emerging from their barracks, much less coming out into the woods after a few pleasure seeking nobles."

I looked out on the scene below from my treetop vantage point. All three Alliances were in shackles. A few porters lay dead with plasma wounds and slug punctures, the two guards among

them. The rest were also shackled, guarded by a group of mangy beings with guns—beings who had the yellow talon and dagger of the Vushrrit Assassin Guild stamped on their shoulder plates and bandanas. There were at least fifteen of them, perhaps more, standing around the Alliances, and Borja was unshackled in their midst.

The Lady Lana was crying, Gaveral was very pale, and the Baron was red with anger. "Now," said Borja, "you don't want to spoil yourself for Lord Qelayan. Come and have something to eat." He turned and began ordering his assassins to set up a camp using both the Alliance tents and provisions and their own cruder things.

Qelayan. One of the most feared gangsters in the sector. I had rejected the kill job without seeing the name on it, but I did remember a live capture clause. That did make it a bounty, in a certain sense, but the wording had still been too vicious for me—it had been clear that the live capture was for a later execution by Qelayan.

I'm not sure quite why I did it, but I scrambled down the tree, hit the ground, and burst into the little clearing where the assassins had ambushed the Alliances. I had my pistols drawn, covering Borja and the most dangerous looking of the assassins. The other killers froze when they saw me, and some tried to reach for their weapons. "Don't touch those," I said, "or I'll fire."

The Baron turned a little redder. "You! Stalking us! You were in league with them all along!"

I ignored him. "So, Borja, you turned out to be the one they should have shot, eh?"

His eyes widened. "Jalazar! I didn't expect you. Out for revenge on these Alliances? It's too late if you are—they're for my boss."

I growled. "You're a traitor, Borja. There's nothing I hate more than a traitor."

"I would have told you, but I knew what you thought of kill jobs. You realize, Jalazar, that I'm going to kill you now—you should have fled while you had the chance. I was just beginning to think I wouldn't have to do it, with you gone."

"I'm the one with the pistol right now."

"True. How about this: I give you 10,000 SEUs, and you walk away and forget about those three. With that and the 25,000 you already have, you should be able to patch your ship up enough to get you off world."

"20,000. You're getting a lot for this job."

"I've got to pay the Vushrrit Guild for their help, and they're not cheap. 15,000 and some provisions."

"Done."

The Baron bellowed, Gaveral hung his head, and the female's tears flowed a little faster and wetter. "Flinteye, please...help us," she whimpered. "They're going to kill us! Please!"

I didn't take my eyes off of Borja to answer her. "I thought I was trying to murder you all."

She couldn't answer that. "Please! If you have any good in your heart, save us!"

One of Borja's assassins tossed a sack at my feet and laid a card on top. Its display showed that there were indeed 15,000 SEUs on it. I holstered my pistol and used that hand to fix the food bag around my neck and slip the card into my pouch. My other pistol covered Borja. Then I stood and slowly backed out of the clearing, with all eyes upon me. Once I had vanished from their sight, I turned and ran, food sack thumping against my armored back.

The last thing I heard was a final wail from the Lady. "Jalazar, please! Please!"

It was getting very dark under the trees—the sun had nearly vanished. I hadn't been furnished with a cot, so once I thought that I had gotten a safe distance away from Borja and his lot, I

clambered up into a tree with some likely looking branches, checked around to make sure no arachnids shared it with me, and curled up on a large branch to sleep. But I couldn't. Hours had passed since the sun's setting, and I was still awake. There was no good reason why I would be having insomnia—it wasn't a problem that usually plagued me. The temperature was cool, my posture not too excruciating, the sounds of the nocturnal beasts more soothing than irritating. I opened my eyes and looked around. The nearest large heat signature was in a tree at least half a standard mile away, and it was sleeping. I was safe, at least.

I knew well enough what was keeping me awake. It seemed like some scum had tattooed the interiors of my eyelids with images of that Alliance female. I could see her, face red and stained with tears, imploring me to assist her and her family. But I had enough money to find a semi-reputable mechanic and patch up the holes in my ship. I didn't need any reward from them. And besides, Borja and twenty Vushrrits made just about even odds. That was too high for my tastes.

I told myself those things several times. I reminded myself of the Baron's cruelty, and Gaveral's constant distrust. But the only face I really saw was the lady's. She hadn't been unkind to me. Even the scream that had led to my capture could be forgiven—I was a terrifying sight in battle, and she had already been on edge from the fight going on around her.

I snarled. Borja had turned traitor. I hated traitors more than I hated pompous Alliances. That was enough.

There was no reason to wait. I moved down the tree, leaping from branch to branch, and then hit the ground running. The darkness was nearly total on the forest floor, for the moon was small and partially covered by clouds. The trees still had enough warmth for me to see them.

I had come a couple miles from Borja's camp, but I recovered them quickly. I saw his guards long before they would have any chance of detecting me and considered my plan. I was going to get in, rescue the Alliances and perhaps the porters, and kill Borja and all his assassins. I had seen the tent where they were kept, but I didn't know where Borja was—and I had little doubt that he was the most dangerous of the lot.

My dagger came out with a faint hiss, and I began to crawl forward, carefully avoiding every stray stick that could betray my position and slipping through foliage with no more rustling than a night breeze. There were three beings pacing the boundaries of the camp in three circuits—one hundred, fifty, and twenty-five yards out from the tent cluster. After a few minutes of observation, I saw that they passed by each other at regular intervals and acknowledged each other with a hand wave. I would need to kill all three in quick succession.

Almost every being, with a few rare and deadly exceptions, can be killed with a single stroke from a blade if the attacker knows the place to strike—whether it be a throat, a heart, a brain, an airsac, or one of the many other structures exhibited by the galaxy's beings. The first guard was a normal biped—most Vushrrits were. And, like most bipeds, he died with hardly a sound when I raked my dagger across his neck. The next was equally simple, although he had two throats to slit.

The third was the closest to the camp—and not all of the others were asleep. A few were sitting in front of the tents right in the center, with weapons laid across their laps—that was where the prisoners would be. The third sentry noticed that his companions were gone, and was about to speak when I drove my dagger into his torso. He had time for a gurgle before I slashed his throat open, but it didn't alert any of the assassins. The ones guarding the prisoners were facing the wrong way—they wouldn't notice the sentries' absence for little while. I slithered in, keeping track of the heat signatures from the bodies of Borja and his group.

The ones in front of the prison tents were well armed and deadly looking, and they had bright lanterns. There was little chance of getting them with my dagger—I would need my pistols for them. I wouldn't use those until the Alliances were free.

The smaller tent was made of tough material, and it was attached strongly to the ground, so I had to cut it. My dagger was of excellent quality, worth at least 3,000 SEUs, so it slashed through easily enough. I managed to slip through without triggering the tent's alarm system.

It was dark inside—the Alliances put out a very faint light. I sheathed my dagger and looked for Gaveral, the one most likely to take my arrival calmly. I found him, shook him awake, and was proved wrong. I had to clap a hand very tightly over his mouth to keep him from crying out. "Don't make a noise, human, unless you want to die."

He fell limp, and I removed my hand. "Flinteye!" he whispered. "But you ran off! You abandoned us!"

"And now I've come back."

His hands were tightly shackled, but my dagger hacked through the weakest point. I had him wake up the others and explain the situation to them. The lady gasped, "Flinteye! You returned. Thank you."

I nodded and cut both her and the Baron loose. The latter was very sullen—he just stared at me, probably exhausted from being angry so much in the last day. I slipped Gaveral the small ion gun that I kept in a sheath on my forearm. "Get your uncle and cousin away. If you get caught, use that."

I decided to wait until they were free to start shooting. I might have slipped away with them, but then I would face days of trekking while being pursued by Borja and the Vushrrits. No, best to end it now.

They didn't see the alarm system. I don't curse often, and try to avoid it, but I let out a big one then, only to have it drowned out by the siren's wail. I put two bolts into the torso of the first guard to rise, shooting through the wall of the tent, using a combination of body heat and lamplight to aim. He dropped, but the others opened fire. "Get out! Run!" I roared to Gaveral.

Slugs and plasma bolts tore through the tent walls. I rolled out and dropped the second guard before he could react, but the camp was roused. Assassins ran out of their tents with weapons in hand, saw me, and opened fire. I sprayed plasma at any being I saw even as missiles of all kinds whizzed around me. A pair of slugs slapped into my chest, forcing me back a couple steps even though my armor stopped them from penetrating. The Vushrrits had good aim and good reactions, but mine were better. I took a plasma bolt burn on my side, but little more. Twenty was a surprisingly large number when they were all trying to kill me, but I cut through them easily enough. Then I saw Borja, drawing his big slug pistol. "Why have you done this, Jalazar?" he bellowed, and for a moment the fighting stopped. "You got your money!"

"You're a traitor, Borja. I despise traitors."

I blew his head into smoking wreckage, without a moment of hesitation, before he had even placed his finger on the trigger of his own pistol. I was indeed the faster gun.

The last few Vushrrits fled into the forest, forsaking the rule of their guild rather than die. The camp was a smoking ruin. I noticed ruefully that the tent where the porters had been kept had been torn to pieces. A single glance through an opening told me that I need not worry about them any longer.

I found the Alliances a few hundred yards back. They had watched the entire fight, short and deadly. "Good evening, Alliances. You're not hurt?"

Gaveral held out the ion pistol to me. "I had to shoot one of them, but we're all right."

"Thank you...Jalazar," said the lady, softly.

"My pleasure. I needed a good fight, and there's nothing I hate more than a traitor."

"I believe we all owe you an apology," she said, nudging her father pointedly.

He scowled and said, "I misjudged you. You are a fine warrior."

I grinned, showing a slice of white fang. "Well, don't just stand there. You and Gaveral go get some food and weapons from those assassins. Borja's pistol is an excellent weapon, and I spotted one or two good plasmas amongst the rest of them. Go on, I'll keep watch over the lady."

The Baron gave me one last scowl, but his nephew pulled him away. I leaned against a tree beside the Alliance female. She was obviously still afraid of me, but no longer seemed to think that I was out to kill her. "So, where are you all going next?" I said.

She shook her head. "I don't know. But I think they've had enough hunting for now—my father and Gaveral are both shaken. We'll probably find a ship to take us home."

"Where is this home?"

"Ferrallis, near the capital. You know where that is?"

"I do."

After a long moment of silence, she said, "I'll have to talk with the others about it, but I want you to have Borja's fee as well as your own. You'll be able to get us back to the city, won't you?"

"Certainly, especially if 75,000 SEUs are the price."

"I thought that came to a hundred thousand."

"I already collected half of my fee. I'll take what's due to me and no more."

She didn't contest that—not because she valued the money, but because she knew that an argument with me was futile.

Gaveral and the Baron returned with bulging packs, and we set out into the forest—we were all too excited to sleep, and the Alliances wanted to get away from the ruined camp. When we got to Settlement Five, I could have the best mechanic in the city for my ship. The galaxy would be meeting up with Jalazar Flinteye again soon.

The End

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"Not either of them," said the boy. "The other one. Pheron."

Emmeldra softened her smile. The poor child must have been dazzled by the clever lies that Pheron had spun. "He's not my brother and not a Prince," she said. "And he's to be given to the dragons. I'm sorry that he deceived you. If you were hurt by it, just remember that not all royalty in Orlath is deceitful. There is some true greatness hiding behind some of us."

"He didn't lie to me," said the boy. "He didn't want to tell me who he was."

Emmeldra nodded. "He didn't want us hunting him. But he would have told you in the end and tried to win your confidence. Where did you meet him?" Though, of course, she knew.

"In the sewers. And he carried me down past a waterfall on his back." The boy grinned. "He only had one arm, but he wasn't afraid at all. He just climbed down."

Emmeldra knelt before the boy and clasped his hand. "What's your name?"

"Carent."

"And your parents were nobles?"

"My father. I'm a bastard." Carent spoke the word without trouble. Of course, very few people thought in the old way about bastards any more, since so many bastard noble children had saved the kingdoms. Emmeldra sometimes wished that her mother had thought to stray from their Darkened father, instead of being so faithful to what she thought was her duty. Emmeldra was sure that she and Hanir would still have been born. Destiny would find a way to claim its own.

She patted his arm. "And your mother?"

"Died in Corlinth."

"I'm so sorry. That must have been awful."

Carent nodded. "You don't look like your brother," he said. "He was very ordinary."

"Yes, he was," said Emmeldra. "And he wasn't part of the Light. I'm so sorry that you had to meet him. I'm glad that you escaped."

"Oh, he would have come to the castle with us," said Carent, "but a woman took him away. She said that she'd kill us if he didn't go with her."

Emmeldra ground her teeth. The cowards of the Dark! Was there no lie they would not spin to ensnare the innocent mind of a child? And it had obviously worked with this one. "Just remember that he's evil, and everything will be all right," she said.

Carent looked at her blankly, and suddenly Emmeldra realized his face wasn't that open, that he looked as if he were concealing something. "I'll remember the truth," he said.

Emmeldra smiled, and patted him on the head, and stood, looking across the room, hoping to see Hanir. Nothing. She sighed and shook her head. None of her family were there. Leroth was praying before Elle, and Hanir was caught up in his useless brooding, and Queen Annilda was with her Council, doubtless rescinding the declaration of Leroth as Heir and replacing it with Hanir's name.

Emmeldra was glad; it was the right thing to do…but she wished that one of them could have come and been with her.

She moved across the room, ignoring the bows and smiles, and looked out the window. It stared out across the ocean, and she spent a moment watching the peaceful movement of the waves, calming her heart. It was all right, she reassured herself. It really was all right. She would have them back by her side soon enough, and Lightflower. And her prophecy was coming true. Nothing could harm her.

She turned around.

The crowd parted.

A minstrel looked up across the room and blinked at her. Emmeldra smiled to see him. He was an elf, slender and delicate and graceful, golden of skin, with long blond hair that hung in a braid to his waist and intense green eyes. There was no better living embodiment of the Light. Even the light of the torches and elf-globes in the Great Hall seemed to cling about him and caress him.

And he was gazing at her as if she were the center of his evening, which was always pleasant.

His hands took up his harp, unconsciously, without his eyes moving from her, and he began to sing. Everyone fell silent and turned their heads as his clear voice soared. Emmeldra blushed under the feeling of eyes on her, and also at the song he sang.

"Oh, my lady, your steps would awaken the rose,
And your eyes would turn to me, trembling and fair,
If I were to dare to approach that close,
If you were to even notice that I was there.

"Oh, my lady, I have been in love with you
Since the moment that I knew what love was,
And since I became sure that mine was true,
And not just a silence, and not just a pause.

"Oh, my lady, would you glance down
On one who lives in the light of your eyes,
Trembles when you do, and makes you the crown
Of his little life of which you are the sunrise?"

There was more, since it was a highly traditional elven love song and had to have at least eleven verses, but Emmeldra's eyes had been growing thick with tears, and she couldn't stand it anymore. Lightflower had sung her a song, and he was gone, and…

She turned and fled the Great Hall, running out into the main courtyard and stopping for a moment beside the fountain of Elle.

It was, of course, much quieter than in the Great Hall, but there was also a stillness that Emmeldra thought was always there, though few people recognized it. The stillness infected her heart and crept into her brain, and she found her breathing slowing.

A strange thought hit her, and she blinked. How long had it been since she prayed?

She bowed her head over the fountain and murmured the words uncertainly, since she was used to appealing to Elle as a guardian of the Cycle and Destiny, outside the bounds of formal prayer. "Lady, Fair One, I come to you now, and ask for your protection. At the moment of what should be my greatest certainty, I find myself assaulted by doubt." Well, perhaps it wouldn't be a formal prayer after all, but Emmeldra had no doubt that Elle would honor it anyway. "Why does Destiny seem to have abandoned me? Lightflower must be free, or he cannot be the green-eyed destiny."

The waters of the fountain glimmered with the reflection of moonlight. Emmeldra stared into them and waited patiently for an answer.

It woke at the back of her mind, and strangely, it was in the form of the next line of her prophecy, which Emmeldra knew well. She shook her head slightly and repeated it. "And you

will come to this alone."

The words hung in the stillness.

Slowly, Emmeldra took a step away from the fountain, wishing, for the first time in her life, to deny one of the goddess's answers.

"No," she murmured, tears flowing down her face. "Surely not? *Surely* not."

But the stillness hung there, and so did the mocking echo of her words.

"But then I don't understand," whispered Emmeldra. "If I am to come to this alone, and Lightflower is to have no part in my prophecy, why did the prophecy mention him as waiting below the sounding stone?"

There was no answer. And Emmeldra knew the question had been presumptuous. She had no right to question the will of the goddess, the will of the Cycle and Destiny. They arranged things for the best. She had only to obey, and listen to what they told her.

And she had not listened carefully enough.

Perhaps she had been wrong all these years, and nothing was what she thought it.

Panic tried to rise in her at that, but Emmeldra firmly crushed it out of existence. How could she be wrong, when the certainty of the prophecy was rising around her? Perhaps her thoughts on the details were wrong, but the prophecy was going to happen, and she knew it. She had only to keep going, and when the moment came, she would know. Her mother had admitted once that her prophecy was not what she had thought it, that it had not foretold the defection of her twin sister in exactly the way it happened. Prophecies were not wrong, but they could be tricky, which was why the priestesses of Elle were needed to give and interpret them.

Yes, that was it.

Emmeldra needed only to seek out a priestess of Elle, stop trusting in her own inferior training, and ask the priestess to tell her what the prophecy meant.

She bent her steps towards the sanctuary, where her brother prayed, and tried to ignore the feeling that she had almost heard something else speaking, something with a mocking voice, something that laughed at her and her prophecy altogether. That was probably just the Dark trying to get to her.

Of course, she did hear a sound behind her, and turn around. But apart from a slight splashing in the fountain, nothing was there.

She shook her head and turned, straightening her shoulders, confident the priestesses would have answers and that the Cycle would give her no enemy she could not handle.

Chapter Fifty-Six
Entrances

"You may have heard people talk about arranging their entrances. These people have no style. One enters. This is the proper component of an entrance. Drama, waiting for the right moment, and all the other trappings are far lesser components of the enterer's art. There is no 'right' entrance except the one the master enterer makes. One does not arrange them. One does

them."

—From On The Matter of Obscure Arts.

"There it is."

Pheron nodded a little to acknowledge the whisper but said nothing, staring at the castle instead. He waited, thinking that something large and wonderful should well up from inside.

Nothing did, though. He was a little tired but still alert. They had eaten a buck that Bloodsinger had run down and managed not to char completely, so he wasn't hungry.

After a few moments, he sighed. No, there was no grand sense of homecoming. There was, most keenly, the sense that he was doing an unpleasant duty that needed to be done.

"Pheron," said Rangeforest then, speaking his name as if it were the name of a large toad. Pheron couldn't blame her, really. The other two humans had treated him coolly for the last few hours, since Stormfleet. "What are we going to do while you go into the castle?"

"I don't know," said Pheron.

"Well, we have to—"

"No one asked you to come," said Pheron, and his temper flared up again. "You may go somewhere else or wait with Bloodsinger."

Rangeforest twisted back to him. Moonlight still managed to make the gold flecks in her eyes show up. "We want to do something to help. Neither Haljen nor I are useless. You know that. What should we do? What's your plan?"

"To get close to Emmeldra and take her Destiny."

"Beyond that!"

"I don't know," said Pheron simply. "I don't know what will happen when I get past that gate. I only know that I'm going to try to take Emmeldra's Destiny away."

"Where is her Destiny supposed to take place?" Haljen asked. When Pheron turned back to look at him blankly, he elaborated. "Where is her prophecy supposed to happen?"

"A cliff above the sea," said Bloodsinger. "Cloudshadow sent me to smash it when she was still my Queen. Emmeldra seemed very sure that it was a cliff above the sea. When I went to smash it, I saw a cave there. I thought fallen stone blocked it, but Destiny might find a way."

Pheron nodded. "The prophecy does say something about gulls and ravens."

"If you don't know, then you can't stop her," said Rangeforest.

"You sound almost as if you would like me to fail," said Pheron, unable to understand why she kept saying these things.

Rangeforest was silent for a moment, and when she spoke again, Pheron could barely hear her over the steady flapping of Bloodsinger's wings. "I think that Jienna was right. You are too dangerous, and if you are not brought to the side of the Dark, you will harm it."

"Why?"

"What you said on the Corlirin," said Rangeforest. "You truly see no difference between what *they* did to Stormfleet and what the dragons did to Corlinth."

"No, I don't."

"You could turn against the Dark as easily as the Light."

Pheron said nothing. It was true, but why should he want to? Rangeforest didn't seem to have asked herself that question, and he had the feeling that she wouldn't understand at all if he asked it. Emmeldra presented a real and immediate threat. Pheron would stop that and then figure out what to do next. If the Dark presented the same threat, then he would stop that, too, but Pheron so far hadn't seen one that was similar.

Bloodsinger went into a circle as they came to the castle. Pheron looked down on the towers and turrets he had known for most of his life and still felt nothing, other than a faint gladness that they weren't likely to sound an immediate alarm at the approach of a dragon.

"Cloudshadow is here."

Pheron looked ahead and saw Bloodsinger's tongue darting in and out of his muzzle again. In the scales beneath his legs, there was a sensation of growing heat.

"But you want to kill her by despair, right?" asked Pheron.

There was a dangerous moment, while Bloodsinger twisted and writhed in midair as if bound on a lead rein, and the humans and the Damned Spider clung to his back in silence. Then he said, "Yes," and slanted his wings, diving for the castle's main gate.

"No good," said Pheron, seeing a shimmer above the gates that grew stronger as the dragon approached. "Destiny guards them. The prophecy must have begun. Besides, I don't think that I should just walk through the main gates anyway."

Bloodsinger flew stubbornly closer for a moment, then snarled as something like a bolt of lightning lashed out at him in warning. "Then where do you want me to take you?" he asked.

Pheron thought a moment, then smiled. Yes, why not? And it was likely to be deserted. "There is a small beach on the seaward side of the cliffs, and a path leads from it up to the castle," he said. "Can you take me there?"

Bloodsinger was already circling. Looking down, Pheron saw the pale shapes of uptilted faces, but not many. People were shy of staring at a dragon even now, he guessed. Besides, it seemed as though a great many people were inside celebrating something. Light spilled from the windows of the Great Hall and cast shifting golden patterns on the Lilitha's waves.

Bloodsinger saw the beach's sand, gleaming pearly, and dived from on high. Pheron clung with his legs and his arm about Rangeforest's waist and watched it rising up to meet him.

A glow of Destiny was there as well, and when Bloodsinger hovered about a body-length above the beach, it startled snarling like a pack of hounds.

"This is close enough," whispered Pheron and unhooked his arm. "Time to see if this will work." He dropped from the dragon's back to the sand.

Nothing happened. The wards didn't open to admit him; he simply passed through them as if they didn't exist. Pheron drew in a breath and looked up at Bloodsinger and the others. Rangeforest and Haljen were squinting as if trying to see through a heat shimmer. The Damned Spider scuttled to the edge of the dragon's back and looked at him.

"Are you sure that you want to come?" asked Pheron.

Even as he asked, the Damned Spider dropped. It landed beside him and stretched its legs as if ready for an invigorating walk. Pheron smiled at it, and then looked up at the others.

"Good luck to you," he said quietly, "whatever happens."

"And you," said Bloodsinger. "I will be waiting."

"I wish I could believe that you'll survive," said Haljen.

Rangeforest said nothing, but she was still squinting when Haljen moved forward to grip her waist and Bloodsinger began to rise. Then, abruptly, she lifted a hand and waved it.

Pheron shrugged. That was apparently some kind of Darkworker farewell. He turned to the stone stairs that led up the cliff, the stairs that he had last climbed with the stump of his arm dripping blood and his mind snarling vengeance against Leroth.

Well, he wasn't adverse to his brother paying for what he had done. But Pheron wasn't really concerned about it. Yet another thing that he was supposed to feel—probably would have felt, were he a proper Destiny-ridden prince—and wasn't feeling.

Oh, well.

The Damned Spider scuttled up the steps beside him for the most part, sometimes tossing a loop of silk over a projecting rock and swinging up that way. Pheron walked and listened carefully, but he could hear no sound closer than the Great Hall. It seemed that no one was watching the beach. And really, why should they be? Anyone who got through the wards should have a part to play in the prophecy and therefore should be no danger even if he thought he was.

Should be.

Pheron smiled and stepped off the last stair, looking around curiously. No one was here, either. If Queen Annilda still kept guards on watch, they had hidden themselves well. He forged forward a few steps, and still no one challenged him. He relaxed.

Then a bark rang out.

Pheron turned sharply and saw one of the castle hounds standing there, snarling at him. He blinked. Usually, the castle dogs hadn't minded him. Of course, they didn't show the intense loyalty to him that they did to his brothers and sister, but, just like the castle horses, they had come to accept him. He couldn't imagine why one of them would start taking exception to him now.

"It's all right," he said soothingly, walking forward with his hand out, thinking that perhaps the dog hadn't recognized his scent.

But the dog backed up, snarling. It had a silver coat that glimmered like molten metal in the moonlight, and abruptly Pheron recognized it. It was the magical hound that had come to his sister Emmeldra's side just before she rode out on the hunt that had gotten her dragon-captured. No wonder it didn't like him.

The hound continued trembling. Magical creature or not, Pheron had the sudden impression that it was about to spin around and start barking an alarm to wake the castle.

At his side, the Damned Spider chittered, a high, crooning sound Pheron hadn't heard it make before. He looked down and blinked to see a purple glow envelop its body.

The hound switched its attention to the Spider. Pheron saw it stand quite still for a moment. Then it lowered its head, fangs bared in a snarl, and charged.

The Spider scuttled forward to meet it, and, before Pheron could cry out a warning or take any other action, had leaped fleetly to the dog's back. It bit down on the back of the hound's neck.

The hound screamed.

Pheron recoiled. He had never heard such a noise. The dog sounded in savage agony and despair at the same time, dying in mind and body.

Shouts echoed up in response to the scream. Pheron turned and ran towards the safety of his old tower, and the Damned Spider jumped off and ran beside him. Pheron glanced over his shoulder, even while telling himself he really shouldn't.

The hound was gone. Or so he thought, for the moment it took him to identify the pile of organs in the center of the courtyard as the dog. Pheron swallowed. "No wonder Haljen was frightened of you," he muttered as he began to climb the stairs.

The Damned Spider chittered again. Pheron looked up, then realized it was hanging from the side of the tower. It extended a loop of silk to him.

Pheron hesitated and looked back down. There were guards running into the courtyard, and it was probable he wouldn't get into the tower before they saw him. He reached up, swallowing his disgust at what he had just learned about his friend, and gripped the silk.

The Damned Spider pulled. Pheron rose from the steps, and then the Spider turned and hauled him up the side of the tower, moving without apparent effort.

The guards had found the dog. Shouts of horror and alarm rose. Pheron listened hard but couldn't hear any words that sounded like "Deathweaver," or even "spider." He relaxed a little, at least until he saw light flash from a golden head. That head was attached to a body striding across the courtyard with an authority he had only ever seen one person use.

"What happened?" asked Queen Annilda's voice a moment later.

The guards went into a flurry of bowing and explaining. However, the Queen didn't move or look up for long moments, and Pheron felt his body strike the hole no one had bothered to fix. He turned around and braced his stump on the floor, scrambling into the dusty darkness. The Damned Spider came to his side and looked down as well.

Queen Annilda had strode into the middle of the courtyard and looked up, her eyes scanning the sky. Pheron couldn't see the expression on her face from here, but thought it was probably a cross of worried and exasperated.

Then she turned around and said, "Don't be ridiculous. It couldn't be an intruder. No one could cross into the castle unless he was a part of the prophecy."

Pheron relaxed and leaned against the stone. The Damned Spider climbed into his lap.

"No," said the Queen, cutting off one of the guards. "I don't want the watch doubled. This is to be a happy time, a celebration of the fulfillment of my daughter's prophecy and the conversion of the dragons. Go back to your posts and don't wake anyone else."

The guards left, not looking happy about it. The Queen remained there for a few more moments, walking around and around the dead dog as if she were trying to figure out what had happened.

Then she turned and started walking towards the steps of the tower.

Pheron caught his breath and scrambled towards his pallet, pulling a crate with him as he went. The Damned Spider seemed to have caught on, but instead of helping him pull crates, had flung a loop of silk up into the darkness and hung there, chattering.

Pheron sat back on his heels and stared up. "You want me to come to your web?"

More chattering.

Pheron hesitated, then jumped. He did still trust the Spider, though *he* would be damned before he knew why.

Loops of silk wound around his chest, his legs, and his arm and stump, and Pheron fought not to panic as he dangled his way up towards the rafters. He couldn't hide any other way, at least not for long. If his mother really thought he was here, she would look everywhere for him. This was the only way.

The Damned Spider is not drawing me up to his web to suck every juice from my body, or turn me into a mass of organs.

Then, to the part of his brain that had given him that image: *Shut up!*

He was well up into the darkness, beyond the reach of the slender slats of moonlight that sneaked through the boarded-up windows, when his mother strode in.

She stared at the crates, then walked past them until she reached his pallet. Pheron hung there, creaking slightly, wondering what she was thinking.

"Pheron?"

She spoke softly, but the tower multiplied noises and Pheron could hear her.

"Pheron, if you're here, I just want to talk," said his mother. "You have a part in this. You are still of the royalty of Orlath."

Pheron frowned down at his mother, wondering what the matter with her was. She had never talked like that to him when he still lived here.

"I realize that I've been cruel," said his mother to the shadows and the dust. "I've treated you like a child, and I shouldn't. You are an adult, of course."

Pheron hung there. He thought of going down to her, but he didn't think he could break the silk. Anyway, he didn't really believe a word she was saying, no matter how much he wanted to.

"I thought you might want to talk," said his mother sadly and walked out of the tower.

Pheron hung there, and wondered, *What am I supposed to think of that?*

Chapter Fifty-Seven
Entrances of the Goddess

"We are all entrances of the goddess, if you think about it long enough. She enters the world in many ways, through the moon and birds and flowers. Why should humans, so often her Destined children, be any different?"

—Rera, High Priestess of Elle.

Leroth knelt before Elle. It was very quiet, with only the sound of splashing water and bells and soft singing to fill up the temple.

And yet, he still could not hear her.

Leroth was not sure why. He had opened his mind as widely as he could, until he could feel the flickers of the wind whispering in his hair and flickers of elemental magic from others in the castle, which ordinarily he could never sense. He should be able to hear the goddess coming, even if it was from a great distance. Her passing should stir him like wind among the grasses of the Corlirin.

Yet, it wasn't.

Leroth sighed at last and got to his feet. Sometimes, one couldn't hear the divine in the classic position, or reciting the classic prayers. Sometimes, one had to go forward, and walk, and look at the stars, and forget about the goddess until reminded.

He dabbled his fingers in the fountain and turned towards the door. As a result, he nearly ran into his sister.

"Emmeldra," he said. "I thought that you would be at your celebration."

"I just realized that I misunderstood my prophecy," said his sister, eyes glowing with an intensity that Leroth recognized. He had looked into pools of water, or mirrors, and seen it often enough in his own face. "I don't think I've trusted the Cycle and Destiny and Elle enough. I want to have a priestess try to interpret my prophecy, and see if there's something I may have missed."

Leroth blinked at her. The glow of Destiny was stronger about Emmeldra than ever. It seemed odd that she would be doubting her prophecy at this late an hour. "Do you want me to come with you?"

To his surprise, Emmeldra nodded jerkily. Well, perhaps not everyone needed to meet the goddess as he did, in solitude and silence. "Yes. Please come with me. I want you to hear what

she says, and tell me if you think it really makes a difference."

"Emmeldra! Of course it will. This is Elle speaking, or at least the priestess with the voice of Elle."

"I don't know," whispered Emmeldra. "I'm trying to have faith, but it's very hard."

Leroth clasped her hands. "Just remember what happens when we don't have faith, Emmeldra," he said earnestly. "We lose out on so much—peace and hope and joy and love. Just have faith, and everything will be all right."

Emmeldra nodded miserably. Leroth was astonished to see tears glow on her cheeks in the moonlight. "What makes you think something is wrong?" he asked.

"Lightflower!" Emmeldra burst out. "He should be beside me, according to the prophecy, but he's not. Why not?"

"Maybe 'green-eyed destiny' means something else."

Emmeldra straightened herself with a shake of her shoulders. "Well, maybe," she said. "And that's what I'm going to find out."

Leroth smiled at her and walked beside her as she headed deeper into the temple, pausing to bow to the statue of Elle and then hurrying on. The songs of chanted prayers and falling water grew more intense as they drew nearer to the inner sanctum, and then a silver-robed priestess with the full moon pendant around her neck stepped out of the shadows and smiled at them.

"Princess Emmeldra, Prince Leroth," she said. "What can the goddess do for you?" Her face was very fine, her hair a pale blond that turned snowy in the moonlight and her eyes a high clear blue flecked with silver. Leroth approved of her. She looked as though she would be a fine portal for the goddess to enter by.

"My prophecy," said Emmeldra. "I find myself doubting it." Leroth was glad that she measured her words and appeared less hysterical than before. It wouldn't do for the royal line of Orlath to lose its dignity before someone who wasn't of it, even a priestess of the goddess. "It speaks of green-eyed destiny, but that is my betrothed prince, and he is not beside me. Can you tell me what that line of my prophecy means, if it is not that?"

The priestess reached out and clasped her hands. "Speak the prophecy aloud for me," she said firmly. "The whole thing."

Emmeldra drew breath, and then began reciting. Leroth smiled at the priestess. This repeating of the words that Destiny itself had given Emmeldra calmed her, and it was the best thing that could be done right now to strengthen her faith.

"Where the seagulls wheel,
There below the sounding stone
Waits the green-eyed destiny,
And you must come to this alone.
Where the ravens flap and cry,
Alone you will stand, between sea and sky,
And the Light will flare in the white fire,
And then you shall come to the end of desire."

The priestess bowed her head, and for a moment there was silence. Leroth could see her hands growing white-knuckled, and wondered if the goddess was coming upon her hard, as sometimes happened when one asked a question at a late hour.

The priestess whispered, "The sounding stone is very near. The stone where the seagulls

wheel and cry, the stone where the waves sound below."

Emmeldra's face smoothed. "I knew it," she whispered.

"The green-eyed destiny waits for you there," said the priestess, speaking in a hollow, distant voice now. She lifted her head, and Leroth saw that her eyes had become entrances for the goddess indeed, glowing silver as the full moon she wore around her neck. "You will enter alone, but you will not be alone once you have entered the cave. And the ravens—" For a moment, her eyes looked human again, or at least divine with a touch of the human about them, and she smiled at Emmeldra. "Can you tell me what ravens symbolize?"

"They eat the dead," said Emmeldra promptly. "Death."

The priestess nodded. "Death waits for you there."

Emmeldra took a deep breath and lifted her chin. Tears still sparkled on her face, but Leroth didn't think they were tears of self-pity, which meant he could approve of them. "I am not afraid."

"Good," said the priestess, but her voice was cool and her eyes gone distant again. "The sea below you, the sky above—" Suddenly she tensed, and her voice became uneven and jagged. "Above you, the sky above you, the white fire above you—"

Then she screamed.

The scream echoed through the temple, cutting above the songs of the prayers and the water, and Leroth heard stunned exclamations. Some of the other priestesses hurried up at once, nodding to the prince and princess even as they bound their sister's hands and peered into her eyes, gently calling a few liquid syllables that Leroth took to be her name.

He turned to look at Emmeldra, who was nearly as pale as the priestess.

"What does this mean?" she whispered.

"It means that she most likely saw you die," said Leroth, and shivered. "It can be hard, sometimes, for priestesses to see prophecies through their own eyes. They can share the goddess's knowledge, and that can be hard for a mortal mind to bear."

Emmeldra nodded, looking composed again. Then she turned and looked up as another priestess approached them, smiling apologetically.

"Lilian's had a fright," she said. "She'll get over it in time. Would you like me to see the end of your prophecy for you, Your Highness?"

"Lilian is really all right?" asked Emmeldra.

The priestess looked at her with respect and love glowing in her eyes. "You are kind," she said. "That is the royalty of Orlath, always caring for others before themselves. Yes, she will be well, and I will look into the goddess's mind and ask her to share the knowledge of your future with me." She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Leroth and Emmeldra waited patiently. Well, at least Leroth waited patiently. He had to admit he wasn't sure if his sister was waiting with proper regal patience. She was biting her lip, which he couldn't help feeling was bad form.

"What is this?"

Leroth looked up sharply. The priestess hadn't spoken in a voice of anything but human anger, and now her eyes were open and she was glaring about with human perplexity.

"What is it?" asked Leroth.

"I don't know," said the priestess. "It's as though someone draped a blanket over the future—no, over the castle. I can still see and feel other futures, but I can't see the future of the Princess Emmeldra or of anyone else here. A great blindness has fallen over the castle. Why?"

"It is probably the operation of prophecy," said an older woman, bustling up efficiently. "It's the first time it's happened to poor Lilian, of course, since great prophecies at work are so

rare, and it probably rattled her." She smiled gently at Emmeldra. "I'm sure that everything will be all right, Your Highness. Trust in Elle."

"But it happened so suddenly," said the younger priestess who had been trying to see Emmeldra's future. "Someone smothered a flame. Someone blanked the future."

"The prophecy probably grew stronger," said the older woman, a little exasperation in her face. "Come, Gemma, don't you know that nothing can affect the operations of Destiny save Destiny itself?" She shook her head at Leroth and Emmeldra. "Excuse her. Her training's not yet complete." She took Gemma's elbow and steered her away. Leroth could hear Gemma complaining as they went.

"I *know* that it wasn't the prophecy. I could see the prophecy. This was like going blind."

"Coincidence, Gemma, I'm sure."

"No, it wasn't…"

Their voices faded, and Leroth shook his head and turned to Emmeldra, who stood with her chin still up and tears still sliding down her face.

"If it comes to death," said Emmeldra, "I will be strong. I will face it with courage. I will not run away, and I will not attempt to turn Destiny aside."

And, abruptly, Elle spoke to him. If Emmeldra was like this, then Hanir, her twin, must be as well. And truly, he was the proper ruler for Orlath, and as a prince, he would forgive Leroth, which meant that Leroth could forgive himself.

And the revelation meant Elle had forgiven him.

Leroth dropped to his knees, sobbing. Emmeldra smiled down at him, a gentle, troubled expression. "What are you doing there, Leroth?"

"Giving thanks to the goddess," said Leroth. "I will stay here and pray for a few more hours."

Emmeldra hesitated, as if listening to some inner prompting, and said, "I think I will join you."

They walked back to the statue and knelt. The sung prayers and splashing of water had already resumed. Together, they added their voices to it, singing the praises of the goddess.

Chapter Fifty-Eight
Gifts

"There are so many gifts in our lives that it is probably impossible to give thanks and praise for all of them. And, of course, sometimes we don't want to give thanks and praise for them."
—The Dark-Eyed Warder of the North.

Pheron blinked his eyes slowly. Something was falling on his face, and he had the odd sensation that he really should sit up.

He finally realized it was sunlight and turned his head slowly. Years ago, he had built a chink into the slats across one of the tower's windows, so that a beam of sunlight would fall on him about an hour after dawn. It still worked. He smiled and sat up, stretching.

"Well, of course it still works," he muttered. "It's only been sixteen days or so since I left."

The words made him shake his head. Only that long? And for the first time he did feel one of the grand sweeping emotions the history-tales talked of, though this time it was shock, which probably still wasn't a proper emotion for a prince to feel. It hadn't taken his life long to change.

Of course, there hadn't been that much that wouldn't have changed it.

His thoughts got interrupted as the Damned Spider chattered next to him. Pheron turned with a slight smile. Unsurprisingly, the Spider had something wrapped up in silk and was pushing it determinedly towards him. The Spider seemed never to have understood that Pheron liked cooked food better than draining the fluid from something wrapped in silk.

"Sorry," he said. "Some other time."

He was hungry, and he hadn't brought any food, since they had eaten meat and fruit that wouldn't keep for the last several days. Thoughtfully, he strolled to the gap in the tower and stood looking down, tucking his stump to his side.

The courtyard bustled now, though the murmuring seemed more hushed and awed than usual. Of course, if Emmeldra's prophecy had begun to come true, that would be the case, Pheron thought. Even the oldest residents of Orlath would only see such a thing happen perhaps twice in their lifetimes, and it was now a good thirty years since his mother's prophecy had come true and she had saved the kingdom from the last war with the Dark.

No one seemed inclined to look up.

No one seemed inclined to watch the doors to the kitchen, either, out of which delicious-looking clouds of steam billowed.

Pheron felt his mouth water. He hesitated, then decided it couldn't do much harm. It would be a good test of his anonymity, if he thought about it. He hunched down in his sweaty and grimy tunic and trousers and descended the stairs, taking care to keep his stump hanging as if naturally by his side. If the servants had been told that Leroth had cut his arm off, he didn't want to draw attention to it.

He ducked into the kitchens, and one of the cooks promptly flapped at him. "Get out of here!" she all but shrieked. "We're making another feast for the Princess Emmeldra. We don't have time to cook up that foul stuff that you stablehands like!"

Well, she could certainly have thought he was worse things. Pheron grunted at her and snatched a piece of bread from the preparation table, along with a piece of hard cheese. The cook seized the knife she would have used to cut them and waved it at his fleeing back, but she didn't care enough to come out of the kitchen and chase him.

Pheron made his way back to the tower to eat. The kitchens were one thing, but the courtyard played host to anyone and everyone, unpredictably, and one of his siblings or his mother were as likely to cross as a servant who would stare past him. And of course someone eating on the tower steps would attract attention. Amazingly, someone climbing the tower steps while precariously balancing bread in one hand and a piece of cheese against his chest with his arm didn't.

Or perhaps it wasn't so amazing after all, Pheron thought as he gained his room again and flopped down to eat. The servants of the castle were as skilled as the royalty of the castle in not seeing those things they didn't want to see, and a dirty, vicious-looking stablehand would hold little interest for them.

Pheron tore the bread in two and held out a piece to the Damned Spider. The Spider examined it with three eyes, then turned loftily away. Pheron laughed and ate both pieces himself.

"You don't like bread anymore than I like wrapped-up animals," he said.

The Spider leaped stiffly back to its prey, radiating indignation, as if disliking bread were only sensible, but disliking the fluids of poisoned animals was base wickedness. Pheron laughed again and went back to eating, knowing better than to offer the Spider a piece of cheese. It nearly bruised his teeth, but he didn't care.

He was back in the castle, and no one had recognized him.

This was going to be almost too easy.

"I can't get too confident, though," Pheron muttered to himself as he nibbled at a pebble-like corner of the cheese. "I could do something stupid otherwise."

A chatter from the Damned Spider could have meant anything or nothing. Pheron turned thoughtfully to look at the creature, who had finished draining the animal, apparently, and had shoved its body away.

"Why did you come with me?" he asked.

The Spider sat there for a few moments, looking straight at him. Then it crossed over to him and laid one bristling leg against his face. Pheron stared into its eyes and didn't see any answer there, unless the tenderness of the gesture was an answer in itself.

"Because you're my friend?"

The Spider looked at him.

Pheron smiled. That was enough of an answer, he supposed.

* * *

Undoubtedly, this was stupid. Undoubtedly, Bloodsinger, and probably Rangeforest—no, *definitely* Rangeforest—would have something to say if they were there. But Pheron didn't feel like listening to the echoes of their voices in his head, and they weren't there, so he was free to walk about as he pleased. The Damned Spider had taken to the walls above him, watching over him and ready to descend if he got into trouble, but not walking beside him. That would have attracted some attention.

As it was, no one glanced at him with more than the kind of fleeting look they would give a cat or dog crossing the courtyard; in fact, most of them had food, so they watched the dogs and cats, and their neighbors, more closely. As long as Pheron kept moving, then they looked at him, and looked away.

This was the section of the castle that his mother had evidently turned over to the refugees of Ozue and Corlinth.

The smell was awful, even worse than the burning dung smell that had arisen from Stormfleet's spilled blood. Plenty of other people hadn't washed any more often than Pheron, and probably less often. What water they drew from the wells was used for drinking; it had to be. There were simply too many thirsty people in too small a space for anything else to happen.

Crude huts built of scraps of driftwood and stone and rags and things that Pheron didn't even recognize leaned against the walls. Animals wandered among the people who sat there, in rags themselves, munching the food the queen had turned over to them and murmuring that it wasn't enough. Pheron saw crawling sores and heard coughing and guessed that most of them had taken injuries in the falls of their cities that hadn't even been treated.

He swallowed his anger, since it wouldn't do any good, and began asking himself what he could do.

One young woman evidently hadn't gotten her turn at the well, possibly because her ribs

showed through her skin with such clarity that she didn't have the strength, and sat with glazed eyes and an empty cup that she automatically extended to everyone, even a dog or cat. Pheron knelt by her and spoke softly.

"Can you give me the cup?"

Her eyes turned to him with dull blankness. "It's mine," she whispered and clutched it closer to her chest.

"I will get some water for you," said Pheron quietly.

"It's mine."

Pheron sighed. He wasn't about to take the cup from her. There was one thing that he could do, and he did it, standing and walking to the well himself.

There were a few people there, but they drew back from him, sullenly, recognizing someone who was stronger and healthier. Pheron called a ball of clay and dipped his hand into the water, waiting until the clay had absorbed some of the water and turned almost to mud.

Then he went back to the young woman and shed what water he could get from his skin and the clay into her cup.

She was not too far gone to lift the cup to her lips and drink noisily, even those few drops of muddy water reviving her a little, and when she brought the cup down again there was more sense in her eyes. "Who are you?" she whispered.

"It doesn't matter," said Pheron and called another few balls of clay. Carefully, he sculpted and patted them into the crude shape of a cup. "Now, will you let me take your cup and fill it with water? You will have this one if I don't come back with yours."

"Why shouldn't you just take that one and leave me with mine?"

Pheron smiled. "Because yours will hold more water. Would you trust me to come back with water in my cup but not in yours?"

Warily, one eye on him as if she thought he might run any moment, the woman gave him her cup. Pheron went back to the well, and filled it, and brought it back to her.

She drank, carefully; apparently, she knew what would happen to her if she swallowed water too fast on an empty stomach. Then she held out the cup wordlessly, and Pheron went back and fetched her more. By now, he was beginning to draw attention, but still he saw none of the refugees he had gotten away from Corlinth, and none of those there seemed to think a man with one arm was strange. Many of them had far worse wounds.

The woman drank only half the water this time, and set the cup down beside her. Her eyes were full of tears. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Could you do that for someone else?"

Pheron turned around to see another woman behind him, this one holding a child. "Fetch water?" he asked. "Of course."

She shook her head. "Sculpt a cup. We can reach the well, but we must drink there. We have no cups to carry the water back in."

Pheron shrugged and called more clay and set to work. Other people drifted over to watch. Someone muttered something about Dark magic, and someone else laughed loudly. "You think the Dark would waste time sending someone here to sculpt cups? When it could just send a dragon to rain down fire and destroy all of us instead?"

Someone else pushed forward and said, "You're not doing it right."

Pheron handed the clay to him without comment and went back to sculpting the crude cups that so many people seemed happy to accept. "Is no one taking care of you?" he asked, when the woman with the child at last came back to take her own cup.

"They invited us to the feast last night," she said. "We got something to eat there. But there wasn't a lot, and they didn't give us healers or blankets to sleep in comfort." She stared at the cup in her hand. "Or cups," she added.

"Why aren't they taking care of you?" asked Pheron.

"Just got here, didn't you?" said the man who had taken over the clay-sculpting, but he didn't sound malicious. "They said that we can't go back to our villages until the war is over, so we have to stay here in the castle. And they can't afford to spare us much, because they need to spend so much time getting ready for the war."

"They should do something," said Pheron.

"Why?" asked the woman with the child.

"They're the royalty of Orlath. They're *supposed* to do something." Pheron couldn't understand why neither his siblings nor Queen Annilda wouldn't have made better arrangements for the refugees.

The man laughed. "They're supposed to fight wars with the Dark. That's what they say when we ask them."

Pheron shook his head again, wishing for the first time in a while that he was a Prince of Orlath, so that he could go and ask his mother to do something for the refugees, and it would be done. But he wasn't and he couldn't, so he did what he could and gave them his clay.

He was so deeply involved in the work that he didn't notice the shrieks of terror at first. Then he saw refugees running, abandoning their huts and heading towards the doors that led from the courtyard.

He would have asked what was wrong, but a shadow swept across him before he could, and he tilted his head back and looked up.

Cloudshadow hovered there.

Pheron had no doubt that it was her, though of course there were many gray dragons in the world. He would never forget those golden eyes that had stared so piercingly into his own, though he wasn't, of course, sure how she had regrown them. She hovered there, and her intense gaze swept the refugees below, as though she were looking for something.

She probably was, Pheron realized abruptly. If Cloudshadow knew he had escaped the wrack of Corlinth, and she hadn't heard anything since Jienna had taken him, perhaps she was waiting for him to come to the castle. And hiding among the refugees would be the kind of thing that a dragon would think of, though neither Pheron's siblings nor his mother could probably conceive of it.

Cloudshadow hovered, and her tongue snaked out of her mouth briefly. Whatever she smelled appeared to disgust her, though. She snarled, and spread her wings, and soared out of sight, wheeling over the walls in the direction of the ocean.

Slowly, the shrieks died. The people crept back. The chatter and the sullen stares resumed.

"She flies over every day like that," said the woman with the child. "No one knows what she wants." She shuddered, her face a picture of misery. "All she has to do is breathe down into the courtyard, and we're all gone. All dead." She shuddered again and turned her back, cradling the crying child against her chest.

Pheron stared into the sky and shivered. "Why doesn't someone stop her?" he asked.

The clay-sculptor, too, had come back almost as if nothing had happened, though his frequent glances at the sky belied that. "Only a noble of Orlath could stop her," he said. "And none of them are interested in us."

"You are wrong," said a clear voice from the head of the courtyard.

The refugees turned, some of them staring, some of them falling into bows or kneels. Pheron froze where he himself knelt, then bowed his head and hoped desperately that nothing bad was about to happen.

The voice was Hanir's.

Chapter Fifty-Nine
Gifts of Discernment

"The keenest gifts of discernment belong to the royalty of the Light. Of course, they would, since it is the royalty of the Light who can understand the beasts of the Dark, and sometimes persuade them to abandon their hopeless defiance of the Light and come to the true side."

—Yillos Goldfleet.

Hanir smiled at the refugees, though it was hard. The condition of the courtyard shocked him. He had thought that his mother had given some of the unused rooms in the castle to these people and provided healers and blankets and food. This looked like a refugee camp from the worst times of Queen Aneron, during the turbulent struggles of founding the kingdom, or the civil war that had followed her reign.

"I am here to bring you some hope," he said. "I have the power to command food from stores released to you, and unused rooms given over, and healers paid to attend you."

Scores of voices lifted, murmuring thanks. Hanir blinked, glancing again at the rags and the sores and the hovels they had thrown up. This was bad. He was just glad that he was a prince of Orlath, and therefore had the power as well as the duty to command better treatment for the refugees.

"The rooms in this wing of the castle are now yours," he said, gesturing to the door he had emerged from. "You will have water brought for baths, and there are basins in each room full of water for drinking. Healers will be along as soon as possible, and servants with food." He had spent most of last night getting this ready, once he had finished his useless brooding. Once the servants had taken the trouble to look at the refugees, they had agreed without hesitation. "I hope that you will feel better soon."

It seemed rather a weak note to end on, but the refugees clustered around him, patting his back and shaking his hand. Hanir nodded and smiled at them and kept the tears of pity and compassion from his eyes. They wouldn't understand if he wept now. They might easily think his tears as false as the tears that Leroth so regularly shed.

Hanir sighed to himself and accepted another handshake. He needed to stop thinking such things about his brother. It was a symbol of his easy temptation by the Dark—and perhaps a reminder of some secret sympathy to it—that he kept thinking such things.

The refugees slowly filtered away, and Hanir walked away to the well they had been using, staring into the water and noting the thin film of filth that covered it. Again, anger stirred. His mother should have done something about this long before now. She could clear the

water with a wave of her hand—

He calmed himself. His mother had many things to think of, with the war approaching, and she had been shut up with her Council most of the night; she hadn't even attended Emmeldra's celebration, from what he heard. It wasn't fair to blame her for the conditions here.

He lingered, staring into the water and wishing there was something else he could do. A pity that his magic was for fire, and not for water; it seemed a poor substitute at a time like this. Fire could cook food, but only if there was food to cook. It couldn't give people something to breathe, as the Gust could, or grow food as Crop mages could, or even provide pure water to drink.

Well, he would go and help heat some of the water for the baths. That would do some good.

He had just turned away when a voice behind him said, "Hanir," in melodies that he wasn't ready to hear. He would probably never be ready to hear them again.

But, slowly, Hanir turned to meet his fate.

Jienna stepped out of the well and smiled at him, the powerful Azure glow around her dying as more of her body emerged from the water. Her eyes held a fire that he had seen before, though he had never thought he would see it in her. "Greetings," she said.

Even her voice was different, though similar enough that he had recognized it at once. Gone was the shy kitchen maid, or any trace of her. Power thrummed there, and the Destiny around her was such a blaze that Hanir had to fight the urge to hide his eyes.

"Greetings, my lady," he said at last, when he thought he had proper control of his tongue and wouldn't blurt out something horribly embarrassing.

Jienna's smile curved. "My lady?" she asked, and walked a step towards him. "Is that all that you have to say to me, who offered you a lover's hold not so long ago?"

Hanir tensed. This had been hard enough the first time. "My lady, I am betrothed to the Princess Joydancer," he said. "I cannot love you."

"You cannot marry me, perhaps," said Jienna. "But you can love me. How many princes and princesses of Orlath have loved someone other than the one royalty chose for them? There have been many. And they have still married as they must." She halted in front of him, head tilted back to regard him. Hanir blinked and shook his head. Somehow, he never realized that she was shorter than he was until she was near. Her beauty and the wonder that hung around her made her seem taller. "But they have loved as they wanted," she whispered, her breath brushing against his face.

Hanir held himself firm and brought up memories of Prince Lightflower and the People of the Blending to hold as defenses against her. This was a temptation, and he could not yield, even though it was possible that Jienna herself was innocent and a tool in all this, not of the Dark. "My lady," he said, "please do not tempt me. Even being unfaithful to Joydancer would be a betrayal."

"No, it wouldn't," said Jienna and slipped her arms around his neck.

Hanir slipped away and said, "When last I saw you, you were untrained in your Azure magic. Yet now you have power. How did that happen?"

Jienna ducked her head. "I am afraid that I have deceived you in some respects," she whispered. "I have control of my magic, and of my Destiny, and I have always known what that was."

"What is it?"

Jienna's smile deepened. No, there was nothing of the shy country girl left in her, Hanir thought in a daze, but that didn't mean the change was unpleasant. There was a depth of passion

in her eyes that she could never have achieved without some experience. "Well, part of it is to love you, my prince," she whispered and slipped her arms around his neck.

"My lady—"

"Think about it, Hanir," said Jienna strongly. "Emmeldra and Lightflower loved each other, but they were also betrothed. Had they ever met before Prince Lightflower came here?"

"No."

"Well, then their betrothal must have been Destiny-arranged. And I loved you in the same way, loving you from the first moment I saw you. But you don't feel the same about Princess Joydancer; you're thinking of marrying her only for duty. Isn't that a sign that your betrothal is only arranged, and not arranged by Destiny?"

"I haven't seen the Princess Joydancer yet," said Hanir, but his voice sounded faint and far away. His senses spun. Jienna's golden eyes seemed to be everywhere, smiling into his own.

"But you have seen me. How do you feel about me? Can you truly explain your own love of me by anything but Destiny?"

"I—I don't know," said Hanir, and he didn't. Could it be true? Could he be fated to love Jienna, even though he was betrothed to someone else? Sometimes Kings and Queens did act in accord with political necessity, and not Destiny. Could this be one of those times?

As if his doubt had weakened him, Jienna seemed to find it easier to draw him close. She locked her eyes with his, and then her lips.

Hanir gasped, his eyes fluttering shut.

"I love you," whispered Jienna. "I have dreamed of this for so long. Please, my prince, will you look upon me, and pledge your troth?"

Hanir opened his eyes and stared at her. Jienna shimmered before him, wonderful and resolute and strong. The treacherous thought crept into his mind that surely Joydancer would understand. The Princess was rumored to be cold, but even so, strong in her Destiny; even Lightflower had told him that. Surely she would understand that she could not obstruct a fated love?

Surely…

"Hanir?" whispered Jienna, and swept a hand through his hair.

He had sworn an oath to the Light.

Yes, he had sworn an oath to do whatever Destiny wanted. And if Destiny wanted this, then how could he stand in the way, and tell Jienna no?

Hanir opened his mouth to tell her yes. This was right. He couldn't deny the feeling that surged in his heart. He loved her, and always would.

Something small came sailing from the side and struck Jienna in the forehead.

"Hanir! She's of the Dark!"

Jienna cried out and staggered back, as though the blow of the clay ball had hurt far more than it looked. Hanir spun, groping for his sword, and then cursed as he remembered he had left Ulua on his bed. He hadn't wanted to frighten the refugees.

Pheron stood there.

At least, Hanir *thought* it was his brother. This man was incredibly dirty, with tunic and trousers cut finer than Pheron would ever wear them. His hair was streaked with grime and tied back in a tail. His brown eyes looked tired and grim and desperate. Hanir wasn't even certain, as he tried to recall it, that Pheron had brown eyes.

But his gaze was steady, for all that, and he held out his single hand with another ball of clay cupped firmly within it.

"How dare you make that accusation?" said Hanir, his heart beating very fast. Of all the people he had thought would turn up and accuse him for loving Jienna…

"Hanir, she's of the Dark. I was her captive for five days. She called dark horses for the run across the Plains, and she has a home where Darkworkers are welcome. She spoke often about using me for the Dark. She was powerful enough to defy Cloudshadow." Pheron spoke all the words quickly and unhesitatingly, though his glance darted to Jienna as she began to move forward.

Hanir looked at his love. Jienna's face was very pale, making her golden eyes look large.

"Is what he says true?" he asked, unable to think of any better way of phrasing it, though that way made it sound as though he believed Pheron.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about," said Jienna. "He's mad. And I will not hear accusations against my good name." She moved forward, hand high and an Azure glow wreathing her fingers.

Pheron, incredibly, just stood there and stared at her. His face even reflected a distant sadness. "Jienna," he said softly, "don't."

"What will you do to me?" she sneered.

"Remove your Destiny," said Pheron. "Don't come closer."

She came closer, one hand lashing out to strike him.

Pheron's hand moved into her path, cupping the clay ball. There was a look of incredible concentration on his face. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Hanir cried out and darted forward.

Chapter Sixty
Shards

"Never name the things you fear
Or curse the things you love.
One makes terror far too dear,
The other brings a curse from above."
—Orlathian Proverb.

Pheron felt the edge of Jienna's Destiny brush against his concentration, and he thought for a moment that he wouldn't be able to accomplish this.

But only for a moment.

The same sense of something emerging from his mind, and Jienna's scream a few instants later, confirmed it. Then came the shattering of the Destiny itself. It flew past him in ringing shards, and Pheron thought that he actually felt some of the pieces graze his skin.

He staggered back, gasping, his hand trembling. The ball of clay was gone, and there was a red mark in the center of his palm, the size and round shape of it.

He lifted his gaze.

Jienna stood before him, trembling as much as he was. The dark hair that had hung

to her shoulders in glowing curls dimmed and lost its luster as Pheron watched. The golden eyes clouded in much the same way that Haljen's eyes had clouded with fear when he looked at the Damned Spider. Jienna cried out again and lifted a hand to her face. When she lowered it, ripples spread out across her skin as if she had dipped her fingers in a pool. It took Pheron only a moment to recognize the ripples as wrinkles. They sank into her face as if they had every intention of staying there.

"Jienna!"

Pheron turned to look at Hanir, watching as his brother gathered the woman close, not even flinching from her suddenly aged face. Hanir stared down into her eyes with tender, dramatic anguish, pushing Jienna's lank and graying hair back from her forehead. And yet, Pheron thought, for the first time that he could remember, he saw a member of his family expressing a genuine emotion. It seemed that Hanir really loved Jienna, or at least the woman whom he had thought Jienna was.

Hanir turned to stare at Pheron, and his stare was fixed. Then it changed, as though Pheron had taken his Destiny away from him, too.

But the emotion that rose there was not anguish, but hatred.

"What have you done?" Hanir asked in a voice like the growl of the ocean in storm. Fire sprang up around his shoulders, and his hair flickered with living flame.

"Taken away her Destiny," said Pheron. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to. You heard me warn her." He wasn't entirely sure why he was apologizing. Jienna would have desiccated him or done something worse. Of that, he was certain.

"That is the most horrible thing you can do to someone," said Hanir. "Taking away their Destiny." His hand went to his side, and once again gripped air. Pheron was glad. He hated to think of what would happen if Hanir already had Ulua and was wielding it. "I told you that."

Pheron blinked. "Told me that?"

"You aren't Pheron at all, are you?" asked Hanir. "You're a Person of the Blending. I did not know that you could take any guise you wanted." The fire grew fiercer and hotter as he took another step forward. "None of them believed me, but I knew what a danger you were. Did you do this to me on purpose? Did you take her Destiny because I wouldn't bear your message?"

"I know the People of the Blending, but I don't know what you're talking about," said Pheron. "I broke her Destiny because she was attacking me. That is all."

"I don't believe you," said Hanir and took another quick step forward.

Pheron called a clay ball and held it up. "All I need do is think of the proper place in the Cycle, and touch you, and your Destiny is gone," he said.

"You would not," said Hanir. "No one could be that evil. You must know that the Destiny of the Kingdom of Orlath depends upon me."

"I have heard over and over that it is not my place to care about such things." Pheron was amazed that he had gotten this far without apologizing or running. The instinctive deference his mother had managed to train into him, the appearance of quietude even when he didn't feel it, was still strong. But this was more important. "I decided to take an interest."

"Did you?" Hanir spoke as if the words didn't matter. He kept his head turned to the side, his eyes fixed on Pheron, as much to say that he would leap if Pheron dropped his guard.

"Yes. This war is evil, Hanir. I don't care who wins, Dark or Light. It's never the leaders, like you, who suffer."

"You have no idea what I have suffered!" cried Hanir, gesturing to Jienna. "I love her."

"Then hadn't you better attend her?"

Hanir glanced at Jienna and gasped aloud. She was on her knees now, visibly shrinking in on herself as if years crushed her shoulders, her hands across her face beneath the gray hair. He hurried back and knelt beside her, murmuring gentle words.

Pheron turned and looked up.

As he had expected, the Damned Spider clung to the wall just above his head and was lowering a loop of silk to him already. Pheron curled his hand through it and clung as the Spider started hauling him from the ground.

Hanir did swing around then, though, and roar at the sight of him escaping. He held up a hand. Pheron caught sight of his fingers shimmering red and kicked the wall, trying to hurry the ascent. The Damned Spider chittered and climbed faster, though Pheron knew it wouldn't be fast enough.

The bolt of fire loosed itself.

Pheron spun to the side, twisting his arm further in the silk as he did so, and the bolt zipped past him and earthed itself in the wall. Bits of stone struck him like the shards of Jienna's Destiny, and he tugged on the thread. The Damned Spider climbed still faster.

"What is going on here?"

Pheron turned his head sharply. Of course. Of course this would happen, just when he might have escaped and no one would believe Hanir's ravings…

All right, so there was a very small chance that would happen. Leroth raves about strange things, but they all know that Hanir doesn't.

His mother strode into the courtyard, just as she had strode into the other one when Pheron hid in the room above her, and looked around with distracted eyes. Her gaze focused on Pheron first, and she stared at him with bitter, resigned eyes that had changed to a flat blue color.

"Why did you come back, Pheron? You might have been well away, and we might perhaps have even thought that you weren't of the Dark."

Pheron didn't reply. He would need his breath. The Damned Spider finally hauled him over the edge of the wall, and he kicked his legs up beneath him. The Spider turned and bit through the silk, and Pheron stood up and began to run.

A good thing, too. The stone at his heels abruptly sprouted many small springs of water, and in seconds they had eaten the solid rock into ruin. Pheron heard several more come into being behind him, but he kept his pace steady and refused to look back. Looking back was the kind of thing that people did in history-tales, when they wanted to mock and taunt their enemies. He had no enemies to do that to, and no good taunts ready at his lips anyway.

He reached the end of the wall, where it ran into a tower with steps down to the eastern end of the Great Hall, and encountered his first pair of guards. They wore distracted expressions. "Where is the Queen?" one of them cried right into his face. "Is she all right?"

"She was when I saw her," said Pheron grimly, and turned and pointed dramatically with his stump. "She's back there! I'm going to get help."

The guards pelted off, yelling. Pheron slipped into the tower and down the steps, the Damned Spider taking to the rafters again as several guards passed him, asking the same questions.

At last he came out into the Great Hall itself—and right into the midst of several dozen servants still cleaning up from the feast.

Pheron didn't even slow. He chose the clearest path he could and skidded along it, yelling as he went, "The Queen! The Prince Hanir! They're in the Plaza of the Wells with a Darkworker!"

More than half the servants hurried off. They didn't want to miss whatever dramatic thing two leaders of the Light would do to a Darkworker. Some of the others tried to stop and question him, but Pheron shook his head briskly at all of them. "Can't stop," he said. "Have to spread the news."

By the time he reached the end of the Great Hall, the servants were pouring up the stairs he had come down. That ought to slow pursuit, Pheron thought as he ducked out the opposite end and into the courtyard where the fountain sacred to Elle stood.

There, he was forced to stop for a moment. No one was about, and so no one would see him lean against the fountain and catch his breath. Besides, his ribs were aching. Jienna had, more or less, healed them, but Pheron's activities in the last few days were more than enough to make them hurt. Riding on dragonback had probably been the gentlest thing he'd done.

The Damned Spider scuttled to his side, chittering and staring up at him with four eyes, while it looked over the courtyard with the others. Pheron smiled down at it in exhaustion.

"You shouldn't be out here," he said. "You'll be seen."

The Spider turned all its eyes gravely on him, as if to invite him to consider the idiocy of that statement.

"Yes," said Pheron a moment later, "so will I." He stood up, leaning against the fountain for a moment that had more to do with the pressure it put on his ribs than any need for support, and began to walk down towards the beach where Bloodsinger had deposited him.

The Spider chittered. Pheron glanced over his shoulder and saw it waving a barbed leg towards their tower.

Pheron shook his head. "That will be the first place my mother will look, if no one else," he said.

The Spider chittered again, sounding disconsolate, but followed him as Pheron strode towards the beach. And, of course, probably because it had something to do with Destiny, yet another familiar voice called his name before he could leave the courtyard. Pheron turned and fell to his knees on the flagstones at once, wincing as a jolt shot through his ribs, but knowing it was the safest thing to do.

"What is going on?"

Emmeldra strode to a stop in front of him, so that he could only see her legs. Pheron had no doubt that he could meet her eyes if he but lifted his head, but why would he be such a fool?

"My Princess?" he asked. It wasn't hard to make his voice sound hoarse, not after running. There probably wasn't much chance of Emmeldra recognizing his voice, anyway.

"What is happening? I know my twin and my mother are involved somehow. And I felt an explosion. I don't know what it means."

"There is a Darkworker in the Plaza of the Wells," said Pheron. "And there was some great magic there, magic I don't understand." That was only true. "I'm off to spread the news."

"Is there danger?" asked Emmeldra, her voice high and stern. Pheron saw the glow of her Destiny brighten about her and decided that she most likely was thinking the danger had come for her and she should be ready to handle it.

I could reach out and touch her right now. I could end it. I could take her Destiny right now.

The Damned Spider chattered then, and Emmeldra started and drew back as it scuttled out into the middle of the courtyard, clashing its mandibles.

"What is that thing?" she asked.

"Don't know, my lady," said Pheron and took a deep breath. The Spider, whether it meant

to or not, had reminded him of his position. He might take Emmeldra's Destiny from her now, but he would have less chance of getting out of the castle alive. He did have a responsibility to do this as safely as possible. He wasn't some hero of the Light, to risk everything on one fatal chance.

"Get rid of it," said Emmeldra, disgust but no loathing in her voice. Pheron didn't think she recognized the Damned Spider as a Deathweaver, either, just as a spider. "I am used to gazing upon beautiful creatures. I don't want to look upon creatures as ugly as this."

Anger sparked in Pheron then, and he spoke before he thought. "Such as a silver hound, my lady? Would you like to gaze upon such a creature?"

"I have a hound like that." Now Emmeldra's voice was breathless with hope. "Have you seen her? Her name is Dyanse, and she has a coat of molten silver."

"I think she is dead," said Pheron, as blandly as he could. "At least, I heard that such a dog had died."

Emmeldra gasped and then began to weep noisily. Pheron stood up and backed away as slowly as he could, keeping an eye on the Princess. But she was entirely lost in her own grief and didn't seem to notice when he whirled and ran for it.

The Damned Spider wasn't with him when he glanced back, but he wasn't surprised. It could hardly be seen leaving with him after what he had told Emmeldra. He hoped that it would sense where he was going and meet him back on the beach.

The stairs down to the beach were empty, and Pheron took them faster than a man with one hand should, now and then glancing nervously over his shoulder. Nothing. He came down to the white beach, the sand brilliant in the sunlight, and hid himself in the shadow of the staircase.

Well.

That had been…sudden.

Pheron wondered if the sudden aging would fall upon Emmeldra when he took her Destiny, or not, and why it had not fallen upon Bloodsinger. Was that something natural, something that happened when a Destiny was stolen, or was it peculiar to Jienna?

Pheron hesitated, then moved slowly towards the edge of the beach, where the wards stopped their buzzing and he could gaze upon the open sea unhindered. The wards again took no notice of his passing. Pheron stooped at the edge of the ocean and called out softly.

"Can I speak with the water?"

He had no reason to expect it to work, save that the People of the Blending might be on the watch and anxious about him, and so it proved. The water spit up like a fussy child and formed into the head of an undine almost at once. Pheron didn't think it was the same one who had tried to teach him, for which he was glad. This one had an altogether more serious expression on her face.

"What is it?" she asked. "Trouble?"

Pheron shook his head. "Not precisely. But I did take a Destiny, that of the Darkworker called Jienna, and she suddenly aged. Why? Will that happen if I touch Emmeldra so? I only want to stop her, not kill her."

The undine blinked. "We have no reason to suspect that it will happen to Emmeldra," she said. "She is youthful, is she not?"

"Yes. But so was Jienna."

The undine shook her head so hard that water splattered upon him. "No," she said. "Jienna was old, at least fifty years old, and kept her youthful looks intact with the power of her

Destiny and her magic."

Pheron's eyes narrowed. "Tell me."

Chapter Sixty-One
Shards of the Past

"There are things we should know, no matter how painful, and some painful things we can derive no benefit from knowing. The trick is to learn to tell the difference before you choose to hear the truth."

—Telos Ravenhaunt, during his statement of execution passed upon Alsondre Terimar.

"My lady!"

Emmeldra jerked herself from her private grief and looked up at the messenger running towards her. Was he the same one as before? No, the other one had been extremely grimy, perhaps a stablehand, and this one wore clean clothes. One of the kitchen servants, perhaps.

"What is it?" she asked, dashing the tears from her cheeks. It wouldn't be seemly for a Princess on the brink of fulfilling her Destiny to cry.

Even so…Dyanse…

The tears threatened to start again, but Emmeldra kept them under control and stared regally at the servant, waiting for his message.

The servant dipped his head, probably in admiration of her regality. "My lady, the Queen requests your presence in the Plaza of the Wells."

Emmeldra dipped her head and began to walk, her skirts swishing around her. She would not run, no matter how urgent it was. It was vital that she show some signs of proper behavior and serve as an example to the scandalously hurrying servants if she could.

Her first sign that something horribly serious had happened came when two guards stopped her, barely remembering to bow, and asked, "My lady, have you seen him?"

"Whom?" she asked.

"A man with one arm and grimy clothes," said the lefthand guard. "He hurt the Prince Hanir badly, we believe, and escaped. He would have had a spider with him," he added, when Princess Emmeldra stared at him.

Emmeldra sniffed. They should have said so at once. "I saw him in the courtyard of Elle's fountain. He delivered me the message that my mother and Prince Hanir had a Darkworker in the Plaza of the Wells. And he delivered the news of the death of my brave Dyanse." The tears came crowding again, and she overruled them with the iron will proper to a princess. "Where he went after that I have no idea."

"Thanks, my lady," said the guard perfunctorily, and with that the impudent pair turned and hurried away from her.

Emmeldra gaped at their backs, then shook her hair out proudly. She would have manners even if they didn't, even if they couldn't. Was not her Prophecy about to come true?

She passed through the Great Hall, up the stairs, and out onto the wall.

Anguish hit her like desert heat and brought her to her knees. Hands grasping her aching hand, she squinted towards the source of the pain.

It was her twin, kneeling on the stones of the courtyard, silent, cradling a woman with long gray hair in his arms.

Emmeldra shakily stood up and made for the stairs down into the Plaza, trying to catch Hanir's eye on the way. Her brother never looked up from the strange woman he held. Was that the Darkworker? Was he sorry that he had killed her? Had he hoped to redeem her?

By the time that she came off the steps, Emmeldra was almost running.

Queen Annilda looked up as she came near. Her eyes were a stormy mix of emotions, so many that Emmeldra grew dizzy as she watched the blues change. The Queen had one hand on her son's shoulder, and with the other she reached out and grasped Emmeldra's.

"My daughter," she said. "This is an easy day for none of us."

"What happened?" asked Emmeldra, trying to get a good look at the woman lying on the ground. She couldn't do it. Hanir was stooped over her, and though he spoke no word, his pain still hammered on the back of her skull.

"Destiny has brought us a burden that we must bear," said her mother, the eyes still shifting with storms. "I did not think that I could bear it, but I can, and you can, and we all can. We all must."

"What is it?" Emmeldra repeated.

"I thought this a story ended long since." Queen Annilda stepped back, somehow without releasing either of them, and said quietly, "Hanir. Let Emmeldra see. She needs to understand."

Hanir leaned back.

Emmeldra gasped softly. The woman lying on the ground was one of the most age-ravaged she had ever seen, though strangely the face itself didn't look much older than their mother's. Rather, it looked as if the woman had suddenly been attacked by years long delayed.

And the despair in her clouded golden eyes was really the most horrible thing about her face, even more than the thick wrinkles or the gray that lay on her hair like snowfall.

"Who is it?" she whispered.

"This is Jienna," said Queen Annilda. "Would that I had heard the name. I could have told Hanir the truth. I knew her, once, though not by that name save in play. It was the name she always preferred, but not the name she was born with."

"Who is she?" Emmeldra said again, feeling as though she had to ask a question twice to get any answers.

"Princess Olassia of Orlath," said Queen Annilda steadily. "My twin."

Emmeldra gasped and saw Hanir flinch as if he had been struck by the words. Somehow, Emmeldra found her voice, since it was obvious that Hanir was not going to anytime soon. "Your sister who turned to the Dark?"

"Yes. I thought her dead in the last great war. But she survived, and she used her magic to keep herself young, and then she came here, seeking to seduce my son."

Emmeldra understood, in that moment, far more than she wanted to. She knelt beside Hanir and wrapped her arms around him. It meant letting go of her mother's hand, but she didn't care. At the moment, her twin needed her comfort far more, and they were as open to each other as they had ever been.

Hanir turned to her with a cry and buried his head in her shoulder. "She's dying," he whispered. "She's dying, and I love her, and she's my aunt."

The words might have made Emmeldra laugh in any other situation. But Hanir spoke

them with a weight of anguish that drove the laughter from her head. She tightened her grip on him, not sure what else she could do, and looked down into the face of the woman who stared back at her.

Yes, there were resemblances to their mother, though someone would have to look hard to see them; Annilda and Olassia had not been identical twins, after all. There was a proud curve to the mouth, a tilt of the head that might make someone think the royal blood of Orlath ran in the Darkworker, perhaps in descent from a bastard long ago. Her eyes were striking enough, even clouded, and she clung to life with a strength that was high and lonely. Emmeldra had often seen the same thing in her mother's face.

But, even more, Jienna—or Olassia—looked like Pheron, at least at some moments. She turned her head, and the resemblance was there. It flashed and vanished once more. Emmeldra felt her eyes running with tears as she reached out one hand and laid it on the woman's forehead.

Jienna started violently at the touch, and Emmeldra realized the fierce stare was just the product of pride after all. She had gone blind.

"What did this?" she said and was prepared to repeat the question twice. But this time Hanir answered, in a broken, gasping voice.

"Pheron. He touched her and stole her Destiny."

Emmeldra swallowed. "That can't happen."

"It can." Hanir ripped himself free of her grip with a strength that Emmeldra wasn't ready for, a strength that made her arm hurt. "He knew of the People of the Blending. He learned this art from them, I swear it. He stole her Destiny, and she is dying."

"She *was* a Darkworker," Emmeldra felt compelled to say. Yes, the strength of her brother's grief was astonishing, but he spoke now as if it were a shame that this had happened to a Darkworker.

Hanir swung on her and punched her in the jaw.

Emmeldra sprawled to the stones with a crack, while their mother said sharply, "Hanir!"

"I want him found," said Hanir. Emmeldra just heard him through the ringing haze. "I want to duel him in single combat, and I want him dead. Do you know where he went, Emmy? He was heading in the direction that you came from."

Emmeldra sat up, holding her jaw, and staring at him. He would hit her, and then ask her such a question? "I don't know," she said. "I saw someone who might have been him, accompanied by a spider, but I don't know where he went." *Elle, my jaw hurts!*

"We made a promise," said the Queen. "I suggest we turn over the hunt to those who can best accomplish it, who would have Pheron in the end anyway." She looked into the sky and called aloud, "Queen Cloudshadow! The one who hurt you is here."

There came a beat of heavy wings, and then Emmeldra's pupil overhung the courtyard. The Queen gazed on them for a long moment, and then her jaws opened and her tongue came out. Even knowing that it was just a gesture of amusement, it had such a savage aspect that Emmeldra shuddered.

"I heard," she said. "I will hunt him down, and then I will torture him to death." She looked directly at Hanir. "If no one in the Orlathian royal line has any objections?"

"No," said Hanir. He spoke in a clear voice, and turned to stare down at Jienna again. "No. The one I loved is dying at his hands."

Emmeldra thought that it was a good thing Pheron had stopped Hanir before he fell into temptation with a Darkworker who was also his aunt, but kept it to herself.

Cloudshadow laughed. "Then I hunt!" she cried and spread her wings, wheeling into the air and bearing hard to the south, in the direction that Emmeldra had come from and Pheron had apparently fled.

Emmeldra let out a slow sigh. This was sudden and horrible, but at least Pheron would be caught and tortured to death before he could hurt anyone else.

She looked back at Hanir. He crouched over Jienna, and his face was back in the mask of anguish he had worn when she entered the courtyard. Compassion swelled in Emmeldra as she felt her twin's pain. She could forgive him for acting irrationally when he was in such agony. She started to crawl forward to comfort him but stopped when she felt her mother's hand on her shoulder.

"Let us leave him to grieve," said her mother softly. "There are things we must speak of. And we must find Leroth to speak of them."

Emmeldra hesitated. She couldn't escape the feeling that her twin needed her now. But her Destiny was swelling stronger, and almost certainly her mother wanted to talk about that.

She turned and walked away in her mother's company, mind awash with sympathy and horror and hope that Pheron would soon be dead, or at least bound to the rack under dragon claws. And perhaps her jaw would stop hurting soon, too.

Chapter Sixty-Two
Hunting

"Never let your enemies know that you know how to defeat them. It loses you a valuable advantage, and most of the time you can't frighten your enemies by using it, either."

—Queen Aneron, when preparing to confront the elves.

Pheron shook his head when the undine finished explaining. "And no one was interested in letting me know," he said.

"Of course not," said the undine. "They wanted you to cooperate with the Dark, and you'd been trained among those loyal to the Light. Most Princes of Orlath would strike at a traitor. Someone who betrays the blood of Queen Aneron is considered cursed forever."

"Jienna wasn't."

"The Dark protected her." The undine shrugged. "Truly, my lord, it doesn't matter. You should consider what you're going to do."

"I've been considering that." Pheron folded his legs beneath himself and ran a handful of white sand through his fingers. "Has my position been too compromised to continue? And what will happen if that's true? Do you have any advice for me?"

"Not truly," said the undine. "We cannot pass the wards." She flowed onto the beach and extended a clear hand towards the wards. They spat, and her hand stopped moving as if she had run into a wall. She shook her head and flowed back into the water. "It's no good, our trying to help you that way. You're on your own."

Pheron thought of the despair that had overtaken Jienna's face when he broke her

Destiny. "What is likely to happen to Emmeldra when I take her Destiny?" he asked.

"She will despair," said the undine. "It always happens."

Pheron narrowed his eyes. "Is this unweaving of Destiny a good thing?"

"Probably not," said the undine. "On the other hand, the Destiny of Orlath in this generation is not a good thing, either. And it rides on three prophecies, all equally strong. If Emmeldra's comes true, it will trigger the others and give them a greater chance of coming true. Besides, it will encourage the Light to slay more and more in its name. Do you truly want either of those things to happen?"

Pheron shook his head.

The undine said, "It can be hard, to be outside the Light and the Dark." He looked into her clear eyes and saw sympathy there. "You have less certainty, even though you have more freedom to act. And when you have to do things that seem evil, it can be even harder." She hesitated, as if wondering what she ought to say next, and then shook her head and dived into the water.

Pheron sighed and sat back on the sand.

Then he heard the chittering.

Turning, he saw the Damned Spider descending the stairs to the beach, or rather next to them. It didn't even bother climbing, but simply slid down a length of silk, and began running across the sand to him the moment it touched down. A leg curved around his waist, and the eyes stared into his while the wild chattering continued.

"I don't know what you mean," said Pheron, wishing that he could understand the Spider as the Spider could so clearly understand him. "Is there danger coming?"

The ground shook, then. Pheron lifted his eyes.

He saw Cloudshadow crossing the courtyard and heard her sniffing, at the same time. Her tongue was all but scraping the stones, and when she lifted her head and stared at the beach with golden eyes, she seemed to see him, even though Pheron knew she couldn't.

"Pheron."

Her voice radiated menace. Of course, she hardly needed her voice to do that. She was menace walking. And when the heavy wings unhinged, Pheron suspected that she would be menace flying, too. He remembered her breathing the thorns quite calmly on the guards who had stood on the parapets of Corlinth, guards she could see, and watching as their blood exploded without flinching. Indeed, one might suspect that she took pleasure in such things, as a dragon.

"I know you are there, Pheron. Your scent leads this way. And I can smell you and hear you, quite effectively. If I must kill you with thorns, of course I will be sorrowful. Torture is what I want. But I will do it if I must."

Pheron sucked in his breath quietly. There wasn't any place to hide on the beach where a cloud of thorns wouldn't find him. And while she might not see him dodging, she could see the beach itself. She had only to direct the cloud of thorns everywhere along it, and it would eventually find him and slice him apart, no matter where he was hiding.

He licked his lips. Then he licked them again. Then he sighed and yielded to the insane courage that shimmered in his heart.

"How did you heal your eyes?" he called.

Cloudshadow's head turned at once, and her tongue flickered very fast with what seemed genuine amusement. "Ah, Pheron, you must do more than that to kill a dragon," she said. "A strike to the heart or throat, in the best and most honorable traditions. The Light knows something about dragonfighting, after all."

"You aren't on the side of the Light at all, are you?"

"Not as they understand it." Cloudshadow began to trot, her wings fanning, and then leaped from the cliff, circling above the beach. She hung not far overhead, still gazing past him, but too close for comfort. She could tear him apart by gesturing with her talons in the right direction. "I bargained with them. You are the price. And now that I have you, I see no reason that I should not keep my part of the bargain."

Pheron drew in a short breath and moved towards the waves, still outside the wards, hoping Cloudshadow's hearing wasn't good enough to direct the sand grains crouching beneath his knees and hand. "And you think that my death will give you pleasure?"

"Yes. Of course it will."

"Bloodsinger's turned against you, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Cloudshadow. "A pity, really. If he could understand the necessities of politics, he would make a good player. But he doesn't see further than one smashed egg easily replaced." Her wings fanned slightly, and she turned to look at Pheron. "Are you going to come with me? You'll keep your life a little longer if you do. I can't promise that the hours of your life will be very pleasant, but they will exist."

Pheron pushed himself backwards into the water. It splashed around him, and Cloudshadow roared and opened her mouth, as if she would breathe a cloud of thorns.

But she also soared towards him as she opened her mouth, so that she was out of the wards and hovering over the ocean.

Pheron shouted, "I would speak with the water!"

The undine, or whatever other People of the Blending might be about, didn't seem to need directions, thankfully. A waterspout flung itself upward and clasped around Cloudshadow's body like huge white arms. The dragon roared again and loosed the cloud of thorns. They cleaved water, and as Pheron ducked beneath the surface, scythed overhead. They cut the air with a horrible whistling sound, but they missed him entirely.

Pheron held his breath firmly, treading water. The thorns soared overhead again, and he surfaced just behind them and sucked in a breath, looking up at the battle.

Cloudshadow had spread her wings and was beating full-force against the waterspout. It simply broke from her efforts and then caught her again. However, she was slowly slithering free. Pheron wasn't sure how. Perhaps the strength of a dragon wasn't entirely natural.

He swam towards Cloudshadow.

A chittering on the beach alerted him, and he looked over his shoulder to see the Damned Spider all but dancing up and down at the edge of the surf.

"I can't come back for you!" he shouted.

The Spider chattered and threw a loop of silk into the water, where it drifted like a rope.

"I told you—"

Then he realized the silk wasn't slung from the Spider's legs or mandibles, or, indeed, any other part of its body. It drifted free on the waves. Pheron grabbed it in his hand and spent a moment looking at the Damned Spider, despite the need for haste. Perhaps the Spider could see the future?

No. Probably the Spider just understood him even better than he had thought a friend could, and certainly better than any human.

Pheron saluted with the silk, and then turned and swam towards the struggle again. The waves churned more violently as he got closer. The waterspout had divided itself in two and sprung up near Cloudshadow's forelegs again, but still it couldn't hold her. Her wings were free

and hammering, and they were the main things propelling her beyond reach of the spouts.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Pheron turned his head. The undine's head had popped out of the water again, this time floating next to him. She frowned at him, not flinching as a crest of foam broke over her head. Of course, she didn't have a body to pull her down in the water as he did.

"Killing a dragon," said Pheron and felt the insane urge to laugh, mostly at the idea of what expressions his family would wear if he said anything like that around them. He held up the silk. "Can you get me up the waterspout?"

"Are you mad?"

"That's not an answer."

"We can get you up the waterspout, but I don't see how that will help you kill a dragon."

"Cloudshadow told me that you can kill a dragon by ripping out the heart or throat. So I'm going to get as close as I can, and then try to do one of those two things."

The undine said, "Why are you risking yourself like this? We can hold her long enough for you to hide."

"Can you kill her?"

"Her magic protects her," said the undine in some discomfort. "A dragon who used pure elemental magic, yes, but thorn dragons aren't like that."

"Then get me to her."

The undine said nothing more but gripped him in her arms and sped along. Pheron saw the white and blue bulk of the waterspout shining ahead.

And then they were going up it.

Cold water washed around him. Pheron didn't know if he could do what he needed to do, even assuming that he could approach the dragon and sling the loop of silk in just the right place. But he pushed the thought away. He would do this.

The undine leveled out near the top of the waterspout, just where it split into two arms trying to grapple the dragon. "Will you give this up now?" she asked.

Pheron shook his head and threw the loop of silk.

It would have drifted wide, but the People of the Blending could call on the air as well, and a wind that Pheron didn't think for a moment was coincidence blew it into the right place. It caught around one of Cloudshadow's talons and pulled tight.

Pheron was jerked out of the grip of the waterspout.

As he twirled and spun, only his grasp on the spidersilk—and the strength of that silk itself—saving him from spinning into the air or the water or something else, he thought quite coolly that there was no time to be afraid. He would probably die before he could feel fear, but he would surely die if he attempted this and stopped to let fear have a voice in what he was doing.

He began to grip the spidersilk and then coil it around his arm, slowly drawing himself higher.

Cloudshadow roared and bucked in the grip of the water, but if she noticed a slighter weight coming up beneath her, she showed no sign of it. Pheron was almost to her belly when she shuddered and tried to roll, and the silk jerked to the side and slammed him into the scales.

Pheron clung.

The world tumbled around him like a juggler's pins, and then leveled out, at least partially. Pheron found himself gazing on an unrivaled view of Cloudshadow's head, her jaws open as she snapped at the water, and the spout that darted about as it attacked her. The silk he had planned to use to bind himself more closely to her body was drifting from one talon, and then

it passed from sight and was gone entirely.

Well.

He would just have to climb, then.

Pheron put his hand on the smooth scales and started easing out around the curve of Cloudshadow's belly, towards her flanks and then her back.

"If you wanted to ride her, you could have *said*."

Pheron glanced to the side and saw the undine hovering on another waterspout. She grabbed him in strong, clear arms without waiting for an answer and heaved him away from Cloudshadow's body. In seconds they were speeding past the twisting muscles, and then she dumped him onto the back, just behind the wings.

Pheron nodded to her as coolly as he could, and then began creeping forward, into the hollow where the wings hammered like mad.

He could do this, he reassured himself. He had ridden her through the alleys of Corlinth, where a fall would be much more dangerous than this.

Perhaps.

He reached her neck, and that was when Cloudshadow seemed to become aware of her danger. She cried out and snapped, trying to turn her head back through the water and reach him, trying to bring up a talon and scrape him loose from his hold.

The People of the Blending intensified their attack.

Pheron drew in his breath through his nostrils and sat back, calling a ball of clay. He had known that he didn't have a blade with him—for that matter, he had probably never owned a blade—that could cut through the thick scales around Cloudshadow's throat or heart.

But he knew someone who did.

So he would do what had worked before, and after that hope for the best of good luck.

He picked his moment, then leaned forward and smashed his hand through her left eye.

Cloudshadow screamed. "You will die for this!" she cried, but she was already trying to scrape him off.

Pheron smashed the other eye, ignoring the drench of foul-smelling liquids. After everything else he had ignored, this wasn't so hard. Then he shouted as loudly as he could, hoping that the People of the Blending would hear him, "Turn her for shore!"

They seemed to hear him. Waterspouts fractured into being all around them, striking at Cloudshadow's wings. She turned and flew back, crying, to the shore, where the People of the Blending wouldn't be able to follow through the wards. Pheron knew that.

He looked ahead to the beach. The Damned Spider waited there, legs splayed, the same purple glow that had been there when it killed Emmeldra's hound infusing its body.

"Bring her down!" he shouted.

The waterspouts tugged as hard as they could. Cloudshadow crashed into the surf at the edge of the beach, shaking her head, roaring like the wounded beast she was, and staggered up the sands. Pheron didn't know if she knew about the protection of the wards or simply was thinking to escape the water.

And it really didn't matter.

The Damned Spider leaped, clinging to her throat in seconds. The mandibles, sharp enough to cut through its own silk, snapped twice, and scales flew from them.

Cloudshadow tossed her head. Pheron flew off and landed in the sand. He came back up coughing and turned to see what was happening.

The waterspouts fell as Cloudshadow passed the wards. But she was already staggering,

her chin plowing a furrow in the sand, and they weren't needed.

She stopped, wings half-flapping, body heaving as if she were trying to breathe in an atmosphere of heavy smoke.

Then she turned inside out.

Pheron stared as the scales seemed to roll back, revealing flesh and organs, and then the mighty wings flipped over on themselves. Cloudshadow was dead. There could be no doubt of that. But how messily and how fundamentally she was dead had still to strike him, Pheron suspected.

He stared at the Damned Spider as it detached itself casually from the corpse and scuttled across the sand towards him.

"You—you might have bitten me," he said, because he could think of nothing else to say.

The Damned Spider leaned against his side with an affronted chitter, and, of course, said nothing.

Chapter Sixty-Three
Hunting the Answer

"When the goddess is hunting,
Then let mortals beware.
The very water herds her quarry,
And her voice is upon the air."
—Hymn to the Goddess as Huntress.

"Leroth, will you pay attention?"

Leroth started and looked up. He had been watching a seagull through the window. It seemed to be a messenger from Elle, so gracefully and delicately did it pick its way along the stones of the courtyard. Of course, it was probably looking for dead animals or sea-trash to eat, which was regrettable, but that didn't mean that he couldn't watch and love it.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," he said.

Queen Annilda glared at him for a moment, then turned to look at Emmeldra. "Your brother is incapacitated by grief, and will be for some time," she said. "We must make preparations for the coming of your prophecy without him. We know where it will be?"

"Yes, Mother," said Emmeldra. A radiant glow infused her and shone from her eyes and hair, with the bruise on her jaw the only sign that anything might mar her performance. Leroth hoped that he looked half as calm when his prophecy started coming true. He had had some disturbing dreams last night after his vigil before the goddess finished, and then he had heard what he was sure was the elven Hunt going past in the high air—

"Leroth, *will* you pay attention?"

Leroth whipped his eyes back. Annilda frowned at him, and then looked at Emmeldra. "It is certain that all the royal family must play a part in your prophecy, and that means that Hanir will have to join us at last. But we can leave him for the moment. Do you know what part he will

play?"

"Yes, Mother. He will enter the cave next after me, and he will call the white fire the last part of the prophecy speaks of. I am sure of it."

Queen Annilda nodded. "And Leroth?"

Leroth tensed. He still wasn't sure. And he had never acted in a prophecy before. What if he got it wrong?

Emmeldra turned to him with a supremely confident and blindingly brilliant smile, though. "I know what he will do," she said. "Leroth is the most devoted to the goddess of all of us. The Destiny will be in the cave, and the prophecy will be coming true, and Hanir will be the representative of the Cycle. But Leroth will be the representative of the goddess, her eyes when she looks on the coming of the prophecy."

Leroth bowed his head. It was what he would have asked for, dared he ask them for anything. "Thank you," he whispered, because the silence was listening, and they seemed to expect him to say something.

Emmeldra grinned at him when he looked up again, and reached over to pat his arm. "There are things I am seeing that I never saw before," she said softly. "I never imagined so many things, Leroth. There will be a contingent of priestesses along, of course, but they will only serve as indirect representatives for the goddess, and stay outside the cave. She must have royal eyes to look through, and so I choose you."

"Thank you," said Leroth again. "When will the prophecy come true?"

"Tomorrow night."

Queen Annilda leaned forward. "You are sure of that, my daughter?" Leroth wondered if Emmeldra noted the trembling in their mother's hands, the intensity in her voice.

"Yes, Mother."

Queen Annilda nodded, and then turned her head away. Leroth caught the gleam of tears on her cheek. This was the first of her children's prophecies to come true, he thought. No wonder she was so affected. And Emmeldra might not survive it. There was that consideration, too.

Leroth looked at his sister, though, and saw no reason to believe she would not survive. She shone with strength, her red hair gleaming like flame. Her green-gold eyes might have rivaled the sunlight for brightness, might have fooled the superstitious into thinking that a second sun shone. Her skin had red shadows of fire underneath it, shadows that reminded Leroth of the way the light of the fire had touched her on that long-ago day when the priestess of Elle spoke their prophecies for the first time.

He envied her.

"Emmeldra, you may go," said Annilda. "I know that you will want to prepare, perhaps pray to Elle and ask for her blessing on this."

"Of course, Mother," said Emmeldra, with an ineffably sweet smile, and then turned and descended the stairs from the conference room. Leroth watched her go for a moment, to keep from meeting his mother's eyes and starting the conversation that was sure to follow.

But that was cowardice, he scolded himself. A true Prince of Orlath would never be a coward. And so he turned back and faced his fate.

"Has your repentance before Elle truly cured you?" asked his mother, eyes narrowed as she gazed at him. "Are you purged of the Dark?"

"I felt the goddess forgive me," said Leroth, the only answer he could give.

"Can we trust you to be her representative when the prophecy comes into play?" his mother asked. "This is important, Leroth."

"I know that, Your Majesty," he said. He had thought it best to be formal to his mother in the last few days, so that she would know how truly sorry he was. "I would never fail the prophecy or you or Elle. Not willingly."

"Not willingly," said his mother. "And not wittingly. Yet somehow the elves used your blood to open the gate from Dezeywandu to Orlath. Their hunt has begun to ravage the kingdoms, Leroth. I think the darkest Dark is coming to the world."

Leroth sat up. "The darkest Dark…" he whispered, the words of his prophecy that he had so often pondered ringing in his head.

"Yes." Queen Annilda stood and paced back and forth, her hands clasped behind her back. "I don't know if this is Destiny, Leroth, or if something truly has entered the prophecy that should not be there, the seed of something greater and darker. Destiny might have used your betrayal to bring the elves to the world so that you could fight them and defeat them forever. Or perhaps you betrayed Destiny itself because you are a weak vessel, and when Destiny uses you to defeat the Dark, it will not be in the way that you expect."

Leroth looked at his hands. "I have come to accept that, my lady."

"To accept it?"

"A Princess of Orlath serves her kingdom," he said. "So does a Prince of Orlath. I will do what I must do. I will go where I am sent." He took a deep breath, and managed to look up and meet his mother's eyes again. "And if the goddess wills me to serve as her representative, at Emmeldra's prophecy, then I will do so, though I am not worthy of the honor. And if it turns out that I am not a tool and not a hero of a prophecy, then I will do what is required of me, and die uncomplaining."

His mother's eyes shone with tears. She reached out and put a hand on his cheek. "You're a good son," she said. "You were arrogant, but you have learned humility. I am afraid that a less grand Destiny would kill Emmeldra. And Hanir…" She broke off, shaking her head. "I am not sure what is wrong with Hanir. Pheron is gone to the Dark. But you will do what you must, Leroth, and that is truly what makes you a hero."

She stood there, looking at him, for another moment, and Leroth at last asked, "Was there anything else that you wanted me to do, Your Majesty? If not, I should go back to the temple and pray, give thanks to Elle for granting me this honor."

"There is one thing," said Queen Annilda. "I do not know for certain that the elves are the darkest Dark, though it seems a reasonable suspicion. But there is another candidate, one that I would not think of did I not fear him so much."

"Who is that?" asked Leroth.

"Pheron."

Leroth blinked at the news that anyone could fear Pheron, but tried to give his mother his complete attention nevertheless.

"I do not like this," said Annilda, scowling out the window. "We should have had some warning of his treachery, as we did with the treachery of my sister." A tremble ran through her as she spoke those words, but she remained strong. Leroth admired that. "There have always been prophecies when a noble of Orlath falls to the Dark. But not this time."

"Pheron was born outside Destiny," said Leroth, remembering what the priestesses of Elle had told him. "He couldn't have a prophecy."

"I am wondering about that," said his mother, her voice ominous as thunder. "I think it too much of a coincidence. What would be the best way to forge a deadly enemy for the line of Aneron? Make us think that we had no enemy at all."

Leroth opened his mouth, closed it. Then he said, "My lady, surely that is impossible. Destiny has dominion over us. It would not do that sort of thing."

Queen Annilda sighed. "Destiny favors the Cycle. And the Cycle requires both Light and Dark for the ultimate triumph of Light."

Leroth said, "Surely they would have chosen someone more deadly than *Pheron*."

Queen Annilda shook her head. "Who knows what he has learned, lurking in the shadows and hating us all? I should have sent him away. I did not have the heart. But then, I never suspected the possible truth until just recently." She faced Leroth, her back straight and face stern without a hint of tears. "I have to ask you, Leroth, son of mine and prophesied to defeat the darkest Dark. If it turns out that you must raise your sword against your brother, Pheron, will you do it?"

Leroth did not have to hesitate. "I did it once before. And he is not my brother, not a true Prince of Orlath."

His mother's face was enormously relieved as she gripped his shoulder. "Good, my son," she whispered. "Good."

Chapter Sixty-Four
Anger

"Sometimes anger is justified, and sometimes it is not. Sometimes there are things that one must do to fend off the anger of others, and sometimes those things are more trouble than they are worth."

—Opening lines of the Instructions to Young Mages.

Pheron had caught his breath and regained some of his composure by the time the first of the People of the Blending came swimming to the edge of the shore, calling to him. Pheron stood and made his way forward, swatting sand off his clothes. He had begun to shiver. He would have to find a dry, comfortable place soon.

"Are you well?"

Pheron smiled in spite of himself at the undine's anxious question. "Well enough," he said. "Better than I could have expected to be, after that."

"That is the truth." The undine folded her arms on the edge of the beach. The gesture was casual, but Pheron could see the outline of those arms trembling a little and suspected that the People of the Blending had their own version of shock. "You do realize that you may have made things worse for yourself?"

"Yes," said Pheron, though at the moment he was too caught up in wonder at having survived to think of the consequences. "I know that my family will try very hard to find out what happened to Cloudshadow."

"And might your bargain with the dragon Bloodsinger also suffer? He wanted to kill the Queen himself, I understand."

Pheron sucked in his breath. "Elle." He had forgotten about that completely. "I only

wanted to stop her trying to kill me. I didn't think about Bloodsinger's vengeance."

The undine laughed, a sound like bubbles popping. "We forgot about it as well. You may speak to him, and we will add our testimony, if you like, and that should help to convince him."

"I hope so," murmured Pheron, thinking of the dragon's anger at his Queen—former Queen—and with how much relish Bloodsinger had discussed her death. He hoped that the dragon would listen to reason, but he didn't think it would actually happen.

"Come, no need to look like that," said the undine. "We will explain." She looked over his shoulder, and blinked her large blue eyes. "What made it do that?"

Pheron turned. The wards glowed with a fiercer light than before. They would be visible for some distance out to sea, now. "I don't know," he said softly. "I hope that I can still pass through them." The Damned Spider scuttled to his side through the wards just then, though, which answered that question. He turned back to the undine. "They will be hunting me, and I don't think much of my chances trying to steal more food from the kitchens. Will you teach me how to catch fish?"

"If you stay on the beach, then we can not only catch fish for you, but start a fire for you to cook one as well." She dissolved into the sea for a moment, only to return in seconds with a flapping fish that she tossed on the shore. "Gather driftwood. I think that you have a few hours, at least, before anyone comes looking for you. They have other things to think about, and all of them will assume that Cloudshadow killed you." She gave him a glance that Pheron couldn't read. "As she should have done."

"Did you foresee my death?" Pheron had to ask. "Is that why you're looking at me so strangely?"

The undine shook her head so that drops of water splattered him. "No. You don't understand what you have done."

"Slain a dragon," said Pheron, and put his hand on the Damned Spider's back. It leaned closer to him, and he kept his eyes on the undine as he made a little bow. "With help."

The undine sighed. "Now is not the time to speak of such things. I should speak with those of my people keeping a watch on the castle. One of those who love fire will come to you and help get it started, if you just gather the driftwood." She once more melted into the ocean.

After waiting a moment to see if she would come back. Pheron shrugged and stood, going to gather driftwood. The Damned Spider watched for a little while, then came to help, scuttling back and forth with driftwood clutched in its mandibles. By the time that the air rippled with soft flame and a fire-snake coiled onto the beach, they had gathered a sizable pile.

The fire-snake wasted no time in coiling itself onto the driftwood and setting it ablaze. Then, while Pheron prepared the fish, it went and examined Cloudshadow's body.

Pheron leaned close to the fire, feeling it begin to dry his wet clothes and skin. He kept his eyes on the pile of driftwood, and the cleaned fish, which soon attracted the attention of the Damned Spider. The Spider came close and reached out a foreleg to touch the fish.

"I am going to cook this one," said Pheron firmly, pulling it away. The fish slipped from its precarious hold on his knee and into the sand, and he picked it up again, shaking his head. "Why don't you go string your web under the cliff and see if you can't catch flying birds?"

The Spider stalked away, radiating that same stiff indignation it had when Pheron had offered it bread and cheese. Pheron found himself smiling without taking the time to consider the appropriateness of the expression.

Well…

Why shouldn't it be appropriate?

Pheron thoughtfully stabbed another piece of driftwood through the fish for a spit and fetched a few other pieces for sticks to hold it, while he thought about that.

The Damned Spider could do some admittedly horrible things with that bite. It had made Pheron uneasy in the first few moments after Cloudshadow's death, just as it had after Dyanse's death the previous night. But really, why should it? He didn't think the Spider would use its bite on him. There was no reason. He shouldn't be any more uneasy with the Spider than he had been with Seros, whom he was sure was a very good swordsman, or with Bloodsinger, who could consume him in wild flame…

Perhaps that last was not the best thought he could have had.

"Amazing."

Pheron started. He had almost forgotten that the fire-snake was there. It coiled up his arm and leaned over the fire, making the flames blaze up again. Then it turned unreadable golden eyes on him.

"I didn't know that a Deathweaver spider bite could work on something as large as a dragon," it remarked.

Pheron smiled a little. "Neither did I."

"You didn't know?"

"I hoped."

The fire-snake considered him carefully. "You must remember," it said, "that this is not your battle alone. We have our own people to think of. If we become too endangered by open battle, we will retreat and try to deliver messages, as we did before."

"How many of your messengers succeeded?" Pheron asked.

The fire-snake twisted, and there came a sound like normal scales shifting. Perhaps it added the sound simply for realism, Pheron thought, because it surely didn't have scales in the way that a living snake did. "None," it said at last. "But we don't want to make anyone suffer in the way that the wars of the Light and Dark make them suffer. Taking away someone's Destiny is one thing. Bringing war down on Light and Dark to encourage them to stop war is quite another."

Pheron frowned. "What made you think that I would be in favor of open war? Surely if I were, you would have not succeeded in getting me to agree to stop this one." *And my mother would be a great deal happier with me, since I would almost surely be a true Prince of Orlath,* he added in the privacy of his own head.

"Some of our people think—"

A roar shattered the silence, and Pheron looked up to see a red shape speeding towards them over the sea, growing larger as the moments passed. He knew it was Bloodsinger. Apart from knowing the voice, it was the way his luck worked. He let out a deep breath and stood.

"We can take you through the fire unharmed," said the fire-snake quietly. "Or under the ocean."

"No. I made a promise to him, and I broke it. This has to be settled in the open, or he won't trust me again. And I don't want someone dreaming of vengeance behind me." Pheron watched the red dragon begin to backwing towards the beach. "I've already had to kill one of them."

The fire-snake hissed something that might have been amusement, but didn't coil and vanish into the flames as Pheron had half-expected. Instead, it remained alert, the golden eyes watching the red dragon as intently as they had watched him.

"You want to stay?" Pheron asked.

"I intend to remain."

Pheron shrugged and turned back to Bloodsinger, noting that the dragon didn't appear to have either Rangeforest or Haljen along. Good. That would make things simpler. Haljen might offer ill-timed words of advice, and Rangeforest would certainly interrupt.

It should be between the dragon and him, since he was ultimately the one who had made the promise, and ultimately the one who had broken his word.

Bloodsinger descended precisely on the beach, so that most of his body up to the wings was resting on the sand, but his tail and hindquarters were dragging in the water. It was the only way he could land and not run into the wards. He stretched his wings once as if shrugging, then settled them deliberately against his sides. Pheron suspected the gesture was to make it clear he wouldn't fly away until his business with Pheron was done.

That suited Pheron. He didn't intend to run away, either. He walked forward to meet Bloodsinger, stopping about halfway between the flames and the dragon. The fire-snake had dropped from his arm and slithered along behind him.

"I see that Cloudshadow is dead," said Bloodsinger, his voice a rumble that could mean anything or nothing. His eyes were no more readable than the fire-snake's. A breath of warm air brushed Pheron's face.

Pheron held himself firm. He was afraid, yes—who wouldn't be, when Bloodsinger could think of such terrible vengeances?—but it was not the sick, soul-destroying terror that would have forced him to run away. He could face this, and he could conquer it. His voice only trembled a little as he said, "Yes. How did you know?"

"I felt her die. Dragons can feel that from each other, if they're in range. I sensed Stormfleet when I came close enough. And I felt Cloudshadow die, since I was close enough already." He slid his head forward, chin plowing along the sand in a way that reminded Pheron uncomfortably of the Dragon Queen as they brought her down. "Why did you kill her?"

"She came to kill me," said Pheron.

"And how did you kill her?"

"I lured her outside the wards, had the People of the Blending in the ocean hold her in a firm grip, climbed up to her with spidersilk, and put out her eyes. Then we drove her to shore, and the Damned Spider bit into her neck and turned her inside out." He glanced at her body as he said that, the first time he had done so deliberately since they landed. It hadn't gotten any better. Still messy, still gory, still radiating the most incredible stench. "I didn't know that that would happen. I was asking the Spider only to rip open her throat, since she had told me herself that that was one sure way of killing a dragon. But I didn't think it would turn her inside out."

"But you did intend to kill her."

"Yes." Pheron turned back to face Bloodsinger.

"Our bargain notwithstanding."

"Yes."

"What were you thinking of our bargain?" Bloodsinger slid his chin closer across the sand. Pheron locked his knees. He was not going to run, or fall over, or faint.

"I wasn't thinking."

Bloodsinger opened his jaws and sucked in a breath. Pheron looked down his throat and saw the light of the fire begin, far back in the darkness. But it was not yet rushing out upon him.

"Tell me one reason I shouldn't kill you now," said Bloodsinger.

"I don't know," said Pheron. "I know what reasons would convince me, but I don't know what would convince you."

"What reason would convince you?"

Pheron shrugged. It was a gesture he hadn't known that he could perform in front of an angry dragon, with teeth longer than his arm leaning above him and fire coming perceptibly closer. "I'm still your best hope of stopping the war. And I like being alive. And there might be something I can do in the future to make up for the killing of Cloudshadow."

Bloodsinger said nothing. Then he turned his head and let the fire rush out over the sea. Pheron closed his eyes.

When he looked again, Bloodsinger was gazing at him with depthless eyes, one talon scraping beneath him as if piling up sand to write in.

"These are the terms," said Bloodsinger. "The new terms. You take the Destiny of your sister Emmeldra. Then you come with me to the place where I think we will do the most good."

Pheron breathed in. Breathed out. "What is this place?"

"The Kingdom of Arvenna."

Pheron nodded in silence.

"No arguments?" said Bloodsinger.

"What argument could I offer?" asked Pheron. "I know that I broke my word. And for all I know, you could be right, and we could do the most good in the Kingdom of Arvenna."

Bloodsinger stared at him for a long moment. Then he turned away. "You are very strange," he said, in a voice so low that Pheron could barely make out the words. "Most would have argued, fought, pleaded for their lives."

"I like the simplicities," said Pheron. He found himself fighting to still his shaking. The danger was past, he told himself impatiently. It was ridiculous to start shaking now. "And you haven't killed me yet."

"I could."

"I know. And the Damned Spider could kill me with a bite. But it hasn't yet."

Bloodsinger was still for a moment. Pheron thought he might have said something, but in that moment the undine rose out of the sea and hurled herself across the sand like the long rush of a wave, pausing before Pheron.

"You must hurry," she said. "I managed to get close enough to hear something of importance. Apparently, the Princess Emmeldra's prophecy will come true tomorrow night. That's not much time to get to the sea-cave where it will take place."

"Could you hear anything else?" asked Pheron, his mind working.

"Such as?"

"Who is going with them?"

"Your mother and brothers, of course. A contingent of the priestesses of Elle. Some of the nobles."

Pheron smiled a little. He couldn't wear any disguise that showed his face, but that seemed as if it wouldn't be a problem.

"And the sea-cave is within the wards, so we can't help you," said the undine.

Pheron nodded. He had expected that. "I will eat, and then go to the temple of Elle," he said.

"Why there?" Bloodsinger asked.

Pheron grinned at him. "I feel the need to pray." He looked at the Damned Spider, who had netted a gull and was busily wrapping it up. "In company," he added.

Chapter Sixty-Five
Anger at Fate

"Anger at fate is largely useless. Even if you could do something about Destiny and the Cycle and their wills, why would you want to? That would be saying that you knew better than the Cycle, and there is no greater blasphemy."
—King Seldon of Orlath, third in line of descent from Queen Aneron.

"Hanir."

Hanir tightened his shoulders. He didn't wish to hear anything right now. He was with Jienna, the last time that he would ever be with her before he must yield to the pressures of the outside world, and he didn't want to think about the outside world until he had to.

Unfortunately, it appeared that the outside world had different ideas than he did when it came to an appropriate time to give him with his beloved.

"Hanir," said his mother gently, and came and knelt beside him. "This is important. We must discuss your place in Emmeldra's prophecy, and what you will do when it comes to fulfilling your part in it."

"She was your sister," said Hanir, not glancing away from Jienna's face. She had aged, but she was nonetheless lovely to him. He only wished that there was still more than a flutter of life in her lungs, that she could sit up and smile at him. "Do you not feel something about her death?"

"Of course," said Annilda.

Something in his mother's voice made Hanir turn to look at her. There was an expression in her eyes that he had never seen before, though it was similar to the one that had been there when she spoke of Pheron to him. Her eyes rested on Jienna, not on him, as he had assumed was the case.

"But I put my grief away long ago," said Annilda quietly. "I thought she was dead, and that was one thing. But I had a harsher grief before that. She was lost to the Dark. Even knowing that her prophecy had decreed it so, I thought that I could turn the Cycle aside and save her. I was foolish." She drew in a breath and let it out in a shudder that might have been a sob with more breath behind it. "I could not. Let that be a lesson to you, Hanir." And now she turned to look at him, blue eyes luminous with a grief that was not for her sister. "You cannot oppose Destiny."

"Why not?" Hanir asked.

Annilda shook her head. "What would we be without Destiny? Without the Cycle to bind our magic? Without Elle to guide us?" She gestured to the walls of the room in which Jienna lay, a little antechamber off the main temple of Elle that was specially devoted to holding Darkworkers who might convert. "Even now, when she is dying, she is within them. This was her Destiny, Hanir, and she could not escape it. And if you dream of escaping your own, then you are as much a fool as she was, and you will fall to the Dark."

Hanir looked at Jienna and said nothing for a moment. Her gray hair lay tumbled around her head, though he had moved it aside so that he could see her face. "I said nothing of escaping my own Destiny," he said. "But how could you think that this was her fate, Mother? She didn't

come to the end that her Destiny had decreed for her. Pheron stole it from her."

Annilda sighed. "We know that nothing happens without Destiny's permission, Hanir. As hard as it is to accept sometimes, the ends we think we have are not always the ends that are decreed."

"What was her prophecy, Mother?"

Annilda was still for a moment, her eyes on Jienna. Then she whispered, half in a chant, half in a normal voice laden with sorrow,

"Into the Darkness you shall pass,
And like a flame within the grass
Spread your dominion far and long.
Like a flame upon the Corlirin Plains.
Many are the attacks you shall sustain,
And yet you shall live, following the song
That shall lead you back at last to the start.
There he waits for you, the lord of your heart,
And you shall convince him you are not wrong."

"She could have convinced me?" Hanir asked. As hard as it was to think of Jienna as part of the Dark, it was even harder to think that she could have convinced him to become part of it. Tempted him to forsake Joydancer, perhaps, but become part of the Dark?

"I didn't think that the prophecy was about you," said Annilda quietly. "I always thought that she had some part in your father's corruption." She turned her head and stared at Hanir. "And as I said, I thought I saw her die. I was sure she was dead. I had no reason to think that she was still living, and that perhaps her prophecy hadn't come to an end after all."

"And now?"

The Queen shrugged. "If Pheron did take her Destiny, perhaps he disrupted the workings of the prophecy."

"Then you agree that her death was untimely?" Hanir pressed.

The Queen smiled gently at him. "No, my son. You are not listening. Pheron did take her Destiny, and with it her life, but he did not disrupt what was meant to happen. The prophecy is only a foretelling of what was meant to happen. It is not, in itself, what was meant to happen."

Hanir rubbed his temples, where a headache was forming. "I don't understand," he whispered. "Will no one but me mourn for her?"

"I mourned for her long ago." His mother put a hand on his arm and drew him away from the bed that Hanir was sure would become a bier, all too soon. "And I must speak with you about your part in Emmeldra's prophecy."

"What does she want me to do?" Hanir asked, knuckling at his eyes. They stung from weeping.

"You don't know?"

At his mother's question, Hanir looked sidelong at her. "No," he said.

"No certainty?"

Hanir shook his head.

Queen Annilda shrugged. "Well, different prophecies work in different ways," she said philosophically. "As far as I can tell, she wants you to call down white fire from the sky. That is what the prophecy says you will do. And, Hanir." Annilda leaned close to him. "You are a prince

of Orlath. Remember that first and foremost. You must do what is required of you, not disrupt the ceremony with your doubts."

Hanir wondered if the doubts in question were written so plainly on his face. But he nodded.

"Good." Annilda exhaled. "The prophecy comes true tomorrow night, and we will go to the sea-cave in company with a small group of priestesses and some of the nobles. Emmeldra will lead the way, of course."

"Where will we assemble?"

"You will hear Emmeldra calling you, I am sure." Annilda hesitated, then put her hand on Hanir's arm. "I mourned, when the one I loved was stolen by the Dark," she said. "There was a time when I adored him, though I knew he was doomed. Don't be angry at Destiny, Hanir. It's not worth it."

"I am angry at Pheron."

Annilda blinked. "Well, he was only a tool of Destiny. Of course, he will die at the dragons' claws for his part in this, but—"

"Cloudshadow caught him?"

Annilda paused. "I am not sure, actually," she said. "I will check on that. But, Hanir, remember what I said. What happens is what happens. It was decreed before you were born, and for another purpose than to bring you to ruin."

"But Pheron is outside Destiny. He knew good and well what he was doing."

"Nothing happens that Destiny does not will," said his mother patiently. "Remember that, and all will be well."

She turned and swept from the room.

Hanir started to turn back to Jienna's bier, and then shook his head. He couldn't look at her, not right now. He went to the window and looked out that instead. It stared over the cliffs themselves, to the sea.

He blinked as something slipped and splashed into the water. Had that been a large fish? A dolphin? He didn't know. It might almost have come from clinging to the wall. Probably a seagull diving for fish.

Hanir watched the sunset glowing in the water like buried fire, and wondered again what good his gift was. He couldn't protect Jienna, and offensive uses were one thing that the Scarlet was better for than any of the other elements. But he had stood there, and watched as Pheron claimed her Destiny, and her life.

Pheron.

Hanir scowled at the thought of his brother. How dare Pheron stand there, his hand out, looking sorrowful for what he was going to do, as if he didn't know the pain he would bring down?

Yes, said his treacherous memory, *and he really did look that way, didn't he? As if he were doing it in self-defense?*

Hanir turned away from the window and went back to the bed. Jienna had a flutter of life in her yet. He clutched her hand, tightly, ignoring the crabbed grip of the fingers and the liver spots that had sprung out on the back of it. He loved her, old or not, Dark or not.

Aunt or not.

Pheron threw that ball of clay as if he were warning you.

"She could still have come back to the Light," said Hanir aloud. "She might have, for love of me."

"My lord?" a voice asked from the doorway. "Are you well?"

Hanir glanced up. A priestess of Elle stood there, in a hooded robe. He nodded.

"Very well?"

"Yes, quite well."

The priestess bowed and withdrew. Hanir went back to gazing on Jienna, and thinking of the damage Pheron had done. How could he take someone's Destiny, even if he didn't mean for Jienna to end up like this? There was nothing more horrific that one could do to a person. Jienna was probably dying partially because she wanted to. Lightflower had committed suicide when the People of the Blending had taken his Destiny, after all.

Could he understand? asked the subtle, poisonous voice of his mind. It was probably the part of his mind most sympathetic to the Dark, too, Hanir thought furiously, trying to deny the conclusions the voice had come to. It ignored him, and carried right on. *If he was born outside Destiny, could he know what it would mean to someone else, to lose that certainty?*

"Mother says that he is within Destiny," Hanir muttered.

Then you can't blame him, the voice came back. *Besides, you don't believe that for a moment.*

Hanir shook his head. "No, I can't excuse him for this," he muttered, gazing into Jienna's clouded eyes. "I can't make this never have happened, and that would be the only way to forgive him, or myself. To have her back again." His hand tightened on Jienna's.

She gripped back. Then she opened her clouded eyes, and smiled at him.

"Hanir," she said, in a creaky voice.

It was more than Hanir had thought he would get. He bowed close to her. "Jienna," he said, to give her that, one more time, someone calling her by the name she had preferred.

Jienna smiled at him, and then closed her eyes. The flutter of her eyelids stopped, and the flutter of her chest a moment later.

Hanir bowed his head and began to weep again, fresh blood flowing from the wound inside him.

Chapter Sixty-Six
Arguments

"Sometimes the greatest things that we do are the most foolish. Except for those with Destiny, of course. Those things only look foolish for a short time, and then their grand truth is revealed."

—Yillos Goldfleet.

"Yes, I know," said Pheron to the Damned Spider. "I know it was foolish. No, I won't try something like that again."

The Damned Spider settled back again, but still seemed inclined to watch him suspiciously. Pheron wasn't surprised. He almost felt inclined to find one of the numerous fountains in Elle's temple and watch himself suspiciously.

What had he been thinking, approaching the antechamber where Jienna lay in his stolen robe and asking if Hanir was well? It was probably only grief that had made Hanir fail to recognize his voice.

Pheron sighed. He could question himself, but he knew the real reason he had gone there. If there had been something he could have done to save Jienna, he would have done it. Not for her sake, but for Hanir's. His brother really had loved her, and the look in his eyes seemed to say that he would never be completely whole again.

On the other hand, Hanir was probably also irritated enough to kill him at the moment, which was something that Pheron thought he would like to prevent. It had been stupid.

The Damned Spider chattered.

Pheron looked up sharply. A priestess was coming towards him, walking with a tired step; in fact, did the priestesses regularly have too much wine, Pheron would have thought that she was drunk. She nodded to him and sat down on the other side of the small shrine to Elle that Pheron had located as a private place. There were many such shrines to Elle within the confines of the larger Temple, and this one showed a huntress-figure riding through the woods under a full moon.

Pheron bent over as if intent on studying the tiny figures of huntress and animals, trying to ignore the priestess's presence. If he had to speak too much, the effect of the hooded robe would be completely destroyed. The Damned Spider had already withdrawn into the shadows.

Of course, the priestess just had to air her thoughts.

"I had a tiring day today."

Pheron looked up, hoping that his silence would seem interested. He wasn't about to speak unless he had no other choice.

The priestess continued with a speed that suggested she wouldn't have waited for an answer, anyway. Her eyes stared blankly at the point of the huntress's bow. "I spent most of my time trying to see into the future, and failing. I don't understand. The goddess grants her children the ability to see into the future, always, if we ask her and look in the right direction. And I'm sure that I was doing that. Why won't she let me see, then?" She glanced at Pheron. "Have you also been trying and failing, sister?"

Pheron shook his head.

"What have you been doing, then?"

Nothing for it, then. Pheron whispered, hoping that his voice, softened, would sound at least a little like a woman's. "Meditating on the princess's prophecy."

The priestess frowned lightly, as if something about his voice had alerted her, but nodded. "That is another thing that all of us have tried and failed at. Mother Elle, come soon and take this confusion away!" She folded her hands in front of her in a traditional prayer pose and bowed her head.

Pheron bowed his own head. Beyond him, he could hear the Damned Spider withdrawing further. He hoped that the spider would take the chance to check on the priestess they had wrapped up in silk. He also hoped that someone wouldn't come around the corner. He had needed the Spider's help to take a robe from a priestess, but let just one priestess see the Spider and their time here was over.

"Mother Elle," intoned the priestess as his side, "may you come swiftly, and allow our clouded eyes to see the future! Tell us what we are doing to displease you. Let us learn what you would have us do!"

Pheron nodded in time with the prayer, ears alert. He couldn't hear any more sounds from

the Damned Spider, though, and guessed it had settled into safety, beyond the shrine. He let out a slow breath.

The priestess stood. "Good luck on your meditations," she said. "I was trying to see for the princess last night, and I had my sight suddenly stolen from me." She shook her head, her face settling into tight lines. "I know that it was something else, something that wasn't the goddess's will, that took my sight from me. I was doing nothing wrong. And yet, what could oppose the will of the goddess and Destiny?" She sighed. "Elle guard you, sister."

"Elle guard you," said Pheron politely.

The priestess, who had started to take a step away, froze. Then she turned slowly back to him. "What did you say?" she asked. "Who are you?" Her eyes had narrowed, and she took a step forward, as if she would lift her hand and rip the hood from his head.

Pheron took a deep breath. It had been a gamble, the thought of remaining hidden under a priestess's robe until Emmeldra's prophecy came true, and one he had always been aware that he might lose. Time for the second plan.

He pulled the hood from his head with his own hand, and fell into a crouch before the priestess as she backed away, a scream visibly rising to her lips.

"No, my lady!" he whispered swiftly. "I pray you hear me."

"Who are you?" she asked fiercely.

Pheron breathed a little easier. So long as he could keep his crippled arm out of sight, it wasn't likely that she would recognize him. He had taken the trouble to bathe in the sea and wash off some of the grime. "A Darkworker who would make repentance," he said. "I have heard that such repentance can be found in the temple of Elle here, and at witnessing the prophecy of a member of the royal line of Aneron."

"I have never heard such a thing," said the priestess doubtfully. "About witnessing the prophecy, not about finding repentance here," she added. "But it is true that the royal line of Aneron produces Destined princes and princesses who serve the Light, and there is no doubt about which side Princess Emmeldra serves…"

She was wavering. Pheron could sense it. He watched her and was still.

"But they would never allow a Darkworker to watch the prophecy come true," said the priestess at last.

Pheron bowed his head and sniffled as convincingly as he could, wishing he had Leroth's ability to produce tears on demand. "Then I am afraid my only chance for true atonement is gone," he said. "And I shall never find my way back to the embrace of Destiny, and the Cycle, and the goddess." He sniffled again. "I wish that you could help me, my lady, truly I do. But I understand you can't."

"I didn't say that." The priestess hesitated again, then knelt beside him. "My name is Gemma," she said. "I was to go along to witness the prophecy, but…I am doubtful of the goddess's favor now, since I failed to foresee for the princess." A harsh smile flickered across her face. "The High Priestess will not be so displeased if I stay here, and you go in my place."

"You could get her to agree?"

"No one will be paying attention to one more priestess at the time," said Gemma. "And when you are redeemed, and we tell them the truth, I am sure that they will accept it." She gazed suddenly into his eyes. "But you must be sincere in your prayers of repentance. Come with me to Elle's shrine as Forgiver of All Wrongs, and spend time praying there. And then you can sleep during the day, and set off with the priestesses who will witness the prophecy at sunset. Are you willing to do this?"

Pheron nodded.

Gemma smiled softly this time. "That shows you are on the true road to atonement," she said, hooking a hand beneath his arm—the real one, luckily—and lifting him to his feet. "A Darkworker would be unable to do such work, and unwilling to give up sleep."

Which shows how little you know about Darkworkers, Pheron thought, and followed her obediently through the silent, moonlit temple to the shrine she had spoken of. It was a larger one than many others, and the statue showed Elle with her hands outstretched, her face etched in an expression that was probably meant to look sternly loving. At least, so Pheron had heard the priestesses claim. To him, Elle looked too much like his mother, and slightly cross-eyed.

"Remain here, and pray," said Gemma. "I will fetch you at dawn, and take you to my cell, where you may sleep." She turned and left the room on light feet before Pheron could say anything.

Pheron sighed and sat back on his heels, in a position that hopefully would look enough like prayer to anyone passing by that she wouldn't question it. He looked around, and saw the Damned Spider emerge from a shadow and scuttle to his side.

"You heard?" he asked.

The Spider tapped a leg on the floor in token of acknowledgment.

Pheron stroked its back, and sighed. "I hope you know that you cannot come with me to the cave," he said softly.

The Damned Spider made no move at all, which Pheron knew was a more profound disagreement than if it had chittered at him.

"A priestess of Elle walking with a Deathweaver spider beside her? It would cause comment."

The Damned Spider was still.

"Will you agree to follow me, but stay out of sight?"

The Spider moved then, rearing back and hooking its front legs around his waist. Pheron gaze down into those seven eyes still intact, and wished he could read them better. The legs hooked around his waist, at least, conveyed as much stubbornness and determination as he could himself.

"You will follow me, but stay out of sight?" he asked.

The Damned Spider leaned close. Pheron hugged it with his one remaining arm, and raised his eyes to the statue's face.

He supposed that he should pray to Elle, but he didn't think it was proper, since he was opposing her. Besides, he didn't think he'd get an answer. He never had, really. The goddess gave her attention to people with Destiny.

Pheron bowed his head and gave himself over to a semi-sleep. The Damned Spider scuttled out of sight, alerting him, and he managed to assume a prayer-like pose before Gemma entered the room. She gave him a tired smile and escorted him whirlwind-like through the temple corridors, shoving him into her cell just minutes before the halls would fill with priestesses of Elle chanting the dawn prayers.

Pheron waited, and heard the scratching a few moments later. He opened the door, let the Damned Spider in, and fell asleep on the narrow bed.

* * *

The chanting woke him before the light of sunset did, or before the tap came on the

door. He rose to his feet and covered his face with the hood before answering it, but it was only Gemma, who nodded when she saw him.

"Come with me," she said, leading him along the corridors with much the same speed as before. "The sisters are beginning to gather in the courtyard. Walk at the end of the line and join in the songs, and I don't think anyone will notice anything different. They are all somewhat caught up in the princess," she added, with a light, almost teasing note in her voice.

Pheron's conscience pricked him. "Thank you, Gemma," he said. "I couldn't have done this without you."

Gemma smiled softly back at him. "I am always happy to see someone come to Elle," she said. "And if you are truly on the road back to the Light, then no sacrifice I can make is too large."

The small stinging in Pheron's conscience faded. She wouldn't really have aided him if he had told her the truth and asked her for help. Even now, she didn't smile at him in the way that a friend would smile at another. She saw him as one more Darkworker to guide back to the Light, one more flawed child of the goddess she was there to help set straight.

By the time he stepped into the courtyard, Pheron was again caught up firmly in the idea that he had to do this. Priestesses of Elle or not, he couldn't allow Emmeldra's Destiny to swing into full-force and go about ravaging the countryside. He fixed his gaze on the ground and walked slowly across the courtyard to stand at the line of swaying, robed priestesses.

Emmeldra stood in the center of it all, the sunset light on her hair and eyes coloring her with flame. Her own flush was high as well, and she gestured and talked with an animation that Pheron had rarely seen her display once she was past childhood and had ceased being so irritated with him. Her Destiny had brightened, and hung around her gleaming, like a ring of metal.

Queen Annilda stood not far away from her, the target of most of Emmeldra's words. She didn't often answer, though, but just nodded and beamed at her daughter. Leroth stood beyond her, his eyes tightly shut as he repeated what was probably a prayer over and over to himself.

Pheron's gaze moved slowly to Hanir.

His elder brother stood not far from his twin, and yet there was something in his stance that set him inexorably apart. Pheron noticed that his gaze occasionally strayed back to the temple, and was sure that he wanted to go back in and sit by Jienna's body, rather than be there. No one would allow him to do that, of course. All the royal family of Orlath had to be there.

As they were, Pheron thought, his mouth crooking in a small smile. The rest of the royal family of Orlath just didn't know it yet.

The light of sunset sank further, and then it was striking and gleaming on the stones of the courtyard with such richness that Pheron blinked. He had never seen it like this. It was probably part of the Destiny.

And Emmeldra opened her mouth and began to sing.

His sister had a lovely voice, but Pheron had never heard her sing like this. Each note had a surpassing richness, much like the light of the sunset. Emmeldra gestured as she sang, and gleaming shapes almost seemed to spring into being, as if she were an illusionist skilled at conjuring up pictures of what wasn't there. Pheron narrowed his eyes, and saw the shape of a falcon, a white flame, a gull, a raven…

But nothing that looked like him.

Good.

He looked up in time to see a misty falcon alight on Emmeldra's shoulder, its talons

digging into the cloth. The nobles standing in a half-circle on the other side of the royal family, echoing the semicircle of the priestesses, gasped and then began to applaud, as they had on that day when the old priestess of Elle announced the prophecies. Some of the nobles even began to sing Emmeldra's prophecy.

Emmeldra took the first few steps forward and then began to run, her skirts swishing around her, her red hair tumbling, her voice singing.

Pheron fell into place at the end of the line of priestesses, hearing the scuttling sound of legs behind him, and obscurely comforted by the noise.

Chapter Sixty-Seven
The Arguments of Fools

"Kindly explain to me the difference between the argument of a fool and the argument of a wise King."

—Rilleta, leader of the Rennon Heresy, when dragged before King Seldon of Orlath.

Emmeldra felt a wonderful lightness and certainty infuse her body. Her feet floated over the stones, and it didn't matter at all that she wore light slippers and they were treading on hard rock. In fact, it was better, so that those who followed her could see her feet escaping injury on the sharp stones and reflect on the higher necessities of faith.

Speretha was on her shoulder, and her family was behind her, and she was going towards her Prince.

Why should she not be happy?

There was no reason that she should not. And so Emmeldra sang, and her words curved up and into the words of one of the oldest songs of Destiny and the Cycle, perhaps sung when Queen Aneron crossed the Rashars into the unsettled country that would become the Kingdom of Orlath.

"Here the morning sun comes rising,
Rising like our newborn hopes in heart.
Escaped are we from terrorizing.
And now we will make peace an art,

"And teach our children freedom true.
Now this country to Destiny decrees
Its devotion, the centuries through,
And remembers ancient loyalties.

"The Dark will have no hold in hearts
That to the Light and Elle are true.
The Dark will find no market for its arts

While we sing the darkness through.

"Here the morning sun comes rising,
And we are following our queen's decree.
Escaped are we from terrorizing,
And to the Light we give our loyalty."

She heard the nobles start singing behind her, and smiled. Then her eyes flickered ahead, seeking the first sign of the cave where her Destiny would come for her.

They were almost out of the castle now, on the rough path that wound over the cliffs beyond. She was sure that she would recognize the headland that loomed over her cave in a moment…

There.

Strange to think about how many times she had gazed on that headland without the touch of Destiny in her eyes and seen nothing but ordinary stone. Even the gulls that wheeled over it in the sunset, their white feathers glowing, their cries melancholy and haunting, had meant nothing to her.

Well, should they have? Emmeldra wondered, and increased the speed and strength of her stride. Speretha sprang from her shoulder, catching her exuberance, and fluttered ahead of her, rising to a great height and then diving just like a true falcon. *I am seeing with the eyes of Destiny now, and all around me the prophecy that the priestess gave me rushes to completion. I cannot be stopped.*

The headland drew nearer and nearer, and with it came the voices.

Emmeldra had heard them before, on the edges of sleep, or when she was concentrating particularly hard on her prophecy, giving her advice that she had not always known how to take. They were the voices of her ancestors, the voices of the royal line of Orlath, and all of them had their own ideas about how she should fulfill her prophecy.

But now, the whispering chorus was agreed. This was the moment of her highest glory. Truly, nothing could stop her, and all the voices of her ancestors had to offer her was encouragement.

Emmeldra smiled. They had arrived at the edge of the headland, and just as she had thought they would, a few carved stone stairs wound down to the cave that was underneath the headland, set far back in the rock. She glanced down at the steps, searching, Destiny directing her eyes a little to the side.

There. A sunburst was carved into the stone. Emmeldra let a wider smile touch her lips. This had been a secret meeting place for the Rennon Heretics, then, those who had turned to the false sun-god Rennon and forsaken the moonlit worship of Elle. The Light had a delicious sense of irony, in guiding her to one of their secret places.

Emmeldra set a light foot on the steps, and started down. She glanced now and then at the waves, which shook the stone with their pounding, and which she might have ordinarily feared. But this was her place. Now. Where the seagulls wheeled, below the sounding stone.

She glanced back, and saw that even the closest person—who was, for some reason, a robed priestess of Elle—was very far back.

She would enter alone, as had also been foretold.

Taking a deep breath, Emmeldra rounded the final curve and found herself staring into the place of her prophecy.

It looked most of all like a rough cave, but here and there the stone had been smoothed and finished by human hands. In the center was one of the foul altars of the Rennon Heresy, a kind of stone always susceptible to the gifts of the Scarlet mages, who had once led the Heresy. Emmeldra smiled again. It was only right that a Scarlet mage who was devoted to Elle should come here now, and only right that another of them should call down the white fire that the last part of her prophecy mentioned.

And then…

And then…

It came to her suddenly. There was something ahead, something horribly and terribly menacing. Did not her brothers' prophecies speak of a danger that must be met and defeated, before it spread? A Dark danger? And had not something draped a blanket of silence and darkness over the castle, blinding the eyes of the priestesses of Elle as they tried to see?

It made sense. There was a danger ahead, and it did not want anyone to foresee it.

But the veils of time would part to a Scarlet mage who looked hard enough. No one could look hard enough but a Princess of Orlath in the time of her Destiny, perhaps, and even then, she would be mad to try it using her own fire. But she could do it using Hanir's fire.

Yes. That, then, was her Destiny.

Emmeldra lifted her head and took a few more steps into the chamber, looking around. A hard scuttling noise behind her set her heart pounding, and she turned, half-expecting to see Lightflower standing there.

But, instead, she saw a large shape hurrying to hide under the lip of the cave. Emmeldra sighed and put a hand over her fluttering heart. She really had to watch herself. So a spider that had lived in the cave all these years had dropped over the edge. What did that matter?

She walked around the altar.

And saw him.

Lightflower was draped behind the altar. His green eyes were wide open and sightless. His body, partially decomposed, had a large sword wound through the heart, and his hand still clutched his lovely blade.

Emmeldra stumbled back, one hand going to her mouth. It could not be true. Hanir's mad tale of the People of the Blending and their magic…it could not be true…

But she knew that something had taken her aunt's Destiny.

Could it be true? Could they have taken Lightflower's Destiny, and he killed himself in despair?

Emmeldra's tears flowed as she knelt beside the body and put a gentle hand on its shoulder. However he had come to be here, she wouldn't be apart from him for long. She had no doubt that looking into the future and trying to see something that didn't want her to see it would kill her. She would fly into the heavens of Elle, and join him forever among the stars beside the moon.

"Wait, my love," she whispered as she rose to her feet. "Only wait. I am coming."

"Emmeldra?"

Emmeldra started and turned. The priestess of Elle had come into the cave and was walking towards her, moving with a stride that was far too confident for one of her station as compared to a princess. And for one of them to address her by name, without using the title!

It was unconscionable. Emmeldra drew herself up. "Do I know you?" she asked coldly.

The priestess pulled her hood back.

Emmeldra stifled a scream. No priestess at all, but Pheron, stood there gazing calmly at

her.

"Emmeldra, will you give this up of your own free will?" he asked. "I don't want to take your Destiny from you. If you can turn away, then come away. We will take you to Arvenna. You should be safe there, beyond the reach of Destiny."

"Can't you feel the prophecy?" Emmeldra asked coldly. "You can't stop me. You can feel it, can't you?"

"I can feel it. I still hope that you will turn away of your own free will." Pheron took a step towards her. "Emmeldra, please."

"No. How dare you!"

"Emmeldra—"

Emmeldra raised a hand. Speretha swooped down from above, and struck Pheron with as much force as he could, dropping him to his knees. Pheron coughed, and then rolled to his feet, pulling off the bulky robe as he did so. It was true. He did only have one arm, Emmeldra saw.

Well, she pitied him. But his treason against the royal line of Orlath was something she could not forgive.

"Emmeldra." Amazingly, Pheron still sounded as though he were trying to persuade her to give up. He called a ball of clay into his one remaining hand. "I don't want to have to do this."

"You can't," said Emmeldra, and lifted her head and looked behind him.

Pheron had just started to turn when Hanir's fist struck him on the jaw, much as it had struck Emmeldra. He bounced on the floor and lost his clay ball, though the way he shook his head showed he was still conscious. Hanir raised his fist again.

"No," said Emmeldra. "Leave him conscious. I want him to witness our triumph."

Hanir turned his head. His eyes glowed savagely, and Emmeldra shuddered a little as she felt the vengefulness in his mind. "He killed Jienna," said Hanir. "I want to kill him for that."

"Leave it," said Emmeldra, trying to recapture the sense of playful exuberance she had felt on entering the cave. It was here, somewhere, and it would come back if she called long enough. "Have two priestesses hold him. I need you to call the fire for me, Hanir. That will be the best vengeance we can take on him. He came to stop my prophecy. Let him see it come true."

"I suppose that what you say is true," said Hanir, and stepped over Pheron, glaring at him. Pheron got to his feet, then fell again as two priestesses stepped in and knocked him down.

Leroth stepped in, his face paling as he saw Pheron. Their mother followed him, and she shook her head at Pheron, though she turned to Emmeldra with unmistakable relief.

"Let us do this, my daughter," she said.

Emmeldra nodded and waited until the two priestesses looked to have Pheron securely in place. Then she backed up, so that she was standing in the entrance of the cave, alone between sea and sky. A raven sleeted past her, just on the edge of sight, and Emmeldra sighed and felt the acceptance of death swell like a black rosebud in her breast.

Then she turned back and nodded to Hanir.

He spread his hands. Scarlet grew like flowers along his hands, and then spilled down and onto the altar. Reaching up, he plucked the white fire from the air.

Emmeldra bent her concentration on the flames. She felt Speretha settle on her shoulder in the moment before the veils of time began to part for her.

Chapter Sixty-Eight
Weapons

"Everything is a weapon, if you only let it be."

—Klessa of the Nine Wonders, asked for a celebration speech when she mastered the Eighth Wonder.

Pheron knelt on the floor of the cave, hearing the singing and the chanting, feeling Emmeldra's intense concentration, and grinding his teeth.

Of all the ways that it could have gone…

This was not one of the ways he would have thought it would end up, if anyone had asked him.

He tried to shift his weight, and only succeeded in making his priestess guards tighten their holds and give him suspicious looks. They held his arm and his stump behind his back, at such an angle that Pheron thought he could feel his bones creak. They didn't want to move too far from Emmeldra's performance, though. After all, if they did, they couldn't tell their novices they'd been here, Pheron thought. So they stood nearby, keeping him where he could feel the heat of the called fire on his face.

Pheron eyed his sister, backlit by the rapidly fading light of sunset, her falcon spirit on her shoulder. He was less than ten feet from her, and given the way his guards were holding him, it might as well have been ten miles.

Damn it.

Of course, there was nothing to keep him from calling another clay ball and thinking of the Cycle, to destroy the Destiny of the priestesses who held him. But the very fact that there was nothing to keep him from doing it was what gave him pause. He didn't want to destroy their hopes, or their sanity, or whatever else it was that taking their Destiny would destroy. He didn't want, ever again, to see the expression he had seen on Jienna's face. It was the reason he had hesitated, trying to give Emmeldra a chance to yield and escape with him.

And the reason he was kneeling here.

I could do it, he thought. *Of course I could. If I didn't care about anything but stopping the war, of course I could.*

But he still cared.

The fire flared, making Pheron start to sweat, and he turned his head, hearing the murmuring of the priestesses.

The fire that Hanir called had flared a pure, snowy white at first, but now it had shades of red in it. The effect was striking, Pheron had to admit. The fire had begun to form pictures, as Pheron had thought it might when he saw the illusions forming around Emmeldra. He could see something that looked like a tree, and something else at its foot that might have been a river. The effect was rather like looking through a dirty window, though the dirt, in this case, was the strange color of the fire that distorted the images it produced beyond all recognition.

"Show me…"

Pheron turned his head and looked at his sister again. Emmeldra had her eyes closed, her hands held out in front of her as if she were pushing off some immense weight that would

otherwise settle on her chest. He could see her face better now as the sun westered further and further, and saw it was set in taut lines of concentration.

"Show me…" she said again.

Pheron looked back at the fire, and saw the images sharpen and clear. Now they were clearly a tree and a river, and more trees beyond the river and the first one. They wavered, and the red fire filling their leaves deepened to dark blue. Pheron blinked. He had never heard of trees with dark blue leaves.

"Yes," said Queen Annilda, voice full of soft encouragement. "That is it. Show us the great danger we will have to fight."

So that was what she was doing.

"What is the place she's showing us?" Pheron whispered to the women holding him, hoping against hope that one of them would say something that would help him decide, one way or the other.

The priestess on his left arm didn't even deign to glance at him, but the one on his stump was more accommodating. First giving the others assembled a quick look, as if to make sure that no one would see her talking to the Queen's disgraced son, she whispered back, "That's Arvenna. It has to be. Trees with leaves like that only grow in Arvenna. I forget what they're called, but I know where they grow."

Pheron looked back at the fire, watching the vision swoop like a dragon along the river and towards something that stood hidden beyond the corridor of trees.

The vision widened into a camp. Pheron could see a ring of fires, and several people standing around the largest one and holding a conversation, though he could hear nothing. Emmeldra gasped, though.

"I can hear them," she said. "They are plotting to overthrow the Light. They are speaking of their lord."

"Can you hear his name?" asked Annilda.

"Almost," said Emmeldra, and she leaned forward like a hunting hawk herself, her manner more intense than ever.

Pheron closed his eyes. He thought he knew what the man's name would be, when Emmeldra finally heard it. Bloodsinger had spoken of a Lord Carleon. That was the name; he was almost certain of it.

That was the place that Rangeforest and Haljen and, probably, Bloodsinger would flee if he failed here. And with advance knowledge, the warriors of the Light were all the more likely to kill them.

Curse it.

"You're sure it's Arvenna?" Pheron asked.

"Oh, yes," said the priestess at his side. "I spent some time there last summer."

Be cursed twice.

Pheron turned his head and stared out the cave mouth. He saw a dark shape moving along the lip, and knew what it was. The Damned Spider was coming to help him, and if he did not do something soon, then he would see people in the cave dying of a Deathweaver spider bite, and the Damned Spider itself brought down.

Fire rent the sky beyond the cave, and shadows moved as some of the nobles who stood outside craned their necks to look. Pheron knew what it meant. Bloodsinger was there, circling. Another blast of fire a moment later, halting uselessly at the buzzing wards, confirmed it.

Pheron tensed. He had to do something…

Be cursed thrice. He was hungry, his bladder was full, and he didn't like the idea of a weapon that would condemn the people he used it on to madness.

Of course, neither did he like the idea of his friends dying.

His bladder was full…

If there was a goddess of desperate ideas, Pheron would have been tempted to thank her. He turned his head and looked up at the priestess on his left arm, the one who had so far been unresponsive.

"My bladder's bursting," he whispered. "Please, can you take me into a corner so that I can relieve myself?"

"No," said the woman.

"Please!" Pheron let a note of whining slip into his voice. It wasn't far from the truth. His bladder did hurt.

"I don't want urine on me, Arria," said the woman on his stump.

"You take him, then." The other priestess released his arm. "I'm not about to miss this." She adjusted her position, peeking around Queen Annilda, who had moved almost in front of her daughter, so that she could see better.

The woman sighed and started to lead him towards a corner.

"Let me go," said Pheron.

She blinked at him. "Are you mad?"

Pheron turned his head and fixed her with an urgent stare. "Do you want the Dark to take you forever?" he asked, in what he thought was a rather good imitation of the way that the priestesses of Elle themselves would say the phrase.

She jerked away without thinking. Pheron turned and stumbled towards Emmeldra, hearing her shriek behind him, and feeling his muscles utter much the same shriek of protest.

It would be awful, to do this to Emmeldra. It would be horrible.

And he accepted it. As Pheron staggered, he called a ball of clay to his hand, and lifted his eyes to fix them on his sister's rapt face. The least he could do was look her in the eye, as a good executioner was supposed to do.

"Pheron, no!"

Pheron pulled up. Queen Annilda was advancing to meet him, her hands spread wide, her eyes the shifting colors of storms. Behind her, Leroth was also watching with wide, shocked eyes. Hanir was too caught up in the fire that he had called for Emmeldra to notice, his eyes closed and his mouth moving as if he spoke the words along with his twin. Arria appeared likewise enthralled, and the other priestess was still cowering behind him.

"Mother," said Pheron quietly, holding up his hand and letting her see that he held the ball of clay. Her face paled as she glanced at it. "Get out of my way. You know what will happen if I touch you."

Queen Annilda drew in a breath and regained her poise. "You won't do it," she said. "Not to someone else. You might think that you could take Emmeldra in hot blood, but you couldn't do it in cold blood."

Pheron shook his head. "There is no blood colder, Mother." He envisioned the Cycle in his mind's eye, gratified to see that no one else was coming towards him. "Get out of my way."

"Hanir!" his mother wailed, and then cast herself forward, without waiting to see if her eldest son answered.

Pheron had never felt calmer, or sadder, in his life, than when he reached out and took hold of his mother's hand, crushing the clay ball between their grips.

Queen Annilda froze, her eyes still shifting, but now staring into some distance that Pheron couldn't see.

She screamed.

That was enough to distract the priestess still watching Emmeldra fulfill her prophecy. She turned, and she screamed, and she ran towards the mouth of the cave, ducking out in a moment. The other one wasn't far behind her.

Pheron stood there, holding his mother's hand and feeling her broken Destiny pass him like shards of glass. Then he dropped her hand, and turned, seeing his path clear to Emmeldra.

"*Pheron.*"

Pheron turned. Leroth was edging towards him, one hand out, licking his lips nervously as winds ruffled his shock of blond hair. The twins still hadn't noticed, caught up in their magic of fire.

"I'll knock you over the edge with my wind," said Leroth. "I am a Gust mage. You know I can do it."

Pheron stared at his brother calmly. "Leroth, I am surprised at you," he said. "You are the most compassionate of all of us, and at the moment, your mother needs you. Why are you here confronting me? Why are you not going to her?"

Leroth's eyes flickered uncertainly aside to Annilda. Pheron called another ball of clay and tossed it at him.

Leroth screamed hysterically and flinched away, proof enough that he didn't know just how Pheron's Destiny-taking magic worked. Pheron turned and walked back towards Emmeldra. He couldn't go faster, given his cramped muscles, but he didn't think that really mattered at the moment.

Emmeldra was still bent forward, eyes seeing nothing but what was in the fire, and her voice whispering, "I can almost hear his name. It hangs all about the camp, but no one wants to speak it aloud. They're afraid of him." A wry smile twisted her lips. "As well they might be. He is very powerful, and very evil."

Pheron called another ball of clay, and fixed his mind on the Cycle, with one element that should not be there defiantly in place.

"Emmeldra," he said.

She did not look aside from the fire, and her whispering likewise continued unabated. "I can almost hear it. Almost catch it. I think that a messenger will ride into the camp soon with a message for him, and then someone will speak it aloud. A message from their Lord…"

Pheron turned his head to look at the fire. The colors of the Scarlet had mostly faded now, and it was exactly like looking through a window, though the vision was still somewhat transparent and he could see Hanir's body, locked in place with the ecstasy of the vision, on the other side. Sure enough, a horse trotted around and between the tents as he watched, bearing a worn-looking rider towards the central group gathered by the fire.

"Almost," Emmeldra whispered.

Pheron sighed, and took a step forward.

"You'll be cursed."

Pheron turned and looked at Leroth, who wasn't coming closer but was speaking to him, pausing to lick his lips in between every sentence.

"Everyone who betrays the line of Queen Aneron and the rightful rulers of the Kingdom of Orlath is cursed." Lick. "I know that." Lick. "I betrayed Hanir, and the elves were able to cut my arm and open the gate." Lick. "You'll be cursed, too, if you harm Emmeldra this way."

Pheron had no idea what that part about the elves and the gate was about. "There seems to be a flaw in your reasoning, brother. If someone were cursed for betraying the royal family of Orlath, then a curse would have fallen on you when you cut my arm off."

Then he turned to Emmeldra, and thought of the Cycle with the clay in its proper, wrong place, and reached out and touched her arm.

For a moment, an enormous pressure leaned on his chest. Then it was gone, and Pheron could breathe again. He opened his eyes, which he had closed unconsciously, and stared around. The buzzing tension of the prophecy was gone from the cave, and he blinked.

But when he looked back, Emmeldra did more than blink. She stood there with the most profound expression of despair he had ever seen on her face, and she opened her mouth and screamed.

Her Destiny snapped past him, moving with a force that flung him from his feet. Pheron rolled, his ribs and arm complaining, and fought his way back to his feet in time to meet Emmeldra's charge.

It seemed that stealing someone's Destiny at the height of their fulfillment of that Destiny didn't just make them despair. It made them really angry.

Emmeldra's punches rained in on him, so quickly that Pheron couldn't find the time to block his head, and she got in a few good ones before it finally occurred to her to draw back and call on her Scarlet magic. Panting, her hair disordered, her eyes mad, she filled a finger with flames and thrust it towards his flame. Pheron flinched back, just barely managing not to lose an eye.

"I'm going to kill you," said Emmeldra, and her voice snapped and hissed like coals. "Do you know what you have done? Because of you, we are unwarned. The Light will fail—"

She screamed aloud then, and then said, "It's gone, it's all gone. 'The end of desire.' The prophecy was right." She laughed, and tried to burn his eye out again, and then turned and ran out of the cave towards the cliff's edge.

Pheron flung himself full length across the cave floor and managed to grab her heel. Emmeldra fell, and her clothes burst into flame. Pheron pulled back as his skin began to blister, and Emmeldra crawled towards the edge again.

Pheron went after her, not sure what he was doing, only sure that he couldn't let her commit suicide. He heard footsteps speeding towards him, and, closer, the scuttling that indicated the Damned Spider was there. But Emmeldra was a faster crawler than he was, and she reached the edge of the cave and grinned triumphantly at him, then pushed herself down and out.

Pheron grabbed her, flailed for something to brace himself on, and found nothing. He slid after her.

Chapter Sixty-Nine
The Laying Down of Weapons

"There comes a time—there always comes a time—to lay down weapons, and proclaim one's

loyalty to something higher and greater."
—Attributed to one of the High Priestesses of Elle.

Leroth didn't actually see Pheron and Emmeldra slide over the edge, but he felt later as though he must have seen it, since everyone told him about it so many times. But he had his own visions, which he didn't share with anyone else. He had to give an official account, of course, but even in the official account there were corners he didn't fill in, things to hear that were no one's but his own.

He knelt beside Queen Annilda, and smoothed her hair back from her face, and looked into those shifting blue eyes, that were rapidly bleeding sense and sanity.

"Mother?" he whispered. "Mother, can you hear me?"

He heard screaming, and the roaring of flames, and an odd scuttling, and Hanir shouting Emmeldra's name, over and over again.

None of it mattered.

His mother mattered.

She looked up at him, and something of recognition remained in her eyes after all, enough that she reached out a hand and gripped his. Leroth gripped back reassuringly. Her hold was failing, but while she was still alive, then he would hold her hand and look her in the eye.

"Leroth," she whispered. "My little boy."

It had been a long time since she had called him that. At least, since he had found out about his Destiny and heard his prophecy, she had called him nothing but his name and his title. Leroth smiled, tears running down his cheeks, and gathered his mother close, as if he were the parent and she the child.

"It's very cold," said Queen Annilda.

"I know," said Leroth, though in truth the only cold he felt was from the slow realization of what was happening. He didn't let that realization have pride of place in his mind just yet, instead staring into his mother's face and rocking her. Queen Annilda buried her face in his shoulder.

"I don't believe it," said Queen Annilda. "How could he do something like that to me? My own son?"

Leroth took a deep breath. The pain was there, his own and hers and even something that might be Hanir's, stabbing him under the ribs as if someone had taken advantage of the chaos to slip in a fatal blade. "I don't know," he said. "Mother, I don't know."

"I tried to do the right thing."

"I know."

"I thought I was doing the right thing, letting him stay in the castle." Queen Annilda shivered. "I thought that he would learn some semblance of proper behavior from that. He didn't. He killed his own mother." She let out a little half-sob, half-laugh. "He killed me."

And the realization exploded on Leroth, the harsher and stronger for being denied.

He bowed his head and began to weep.

His mother regarded him gently, fondly, even reaching up a hand and laying it across his hair. "My little weeper," she whispered. "You always were. Your gift is your tears, and the compassion that you can summon, Leroth. Never forget that."

"I won't," he said.

"The darkest Dark…" Another shiver from his mother. "I think it's Pheron. I told you that. Promise that you will kill him for me?"

Leroth shivered at the thought of the curse that would be upon him if he did that. Then he thought about the curse that was probably already on him if Pheron was right, and decided that killing his brother, at his mother's express command, was probably a great deal different than thinking that Hanir was of the Dark.

Or cutting off someone's arm.

He turned his mind away from the unwelcome thought, and back to his mother. "Mother, you can still live," he said. "I thought that—that your sister died from keeping herself young, and from the curse that was upon her for betraying her blood."

"She lost the will to live." Annilda closed her eyes and seemed to be trying to marshal the strength to speak. "Imagine living if your Destiny was taken from you, Leroth, if suddenly the certainty that you hold so dear was gone. Could you do it?"

Leroth shook his head.

"Then don't try to tie me to life." A distant smile flickered across Annilda's lips. "In a way, I died ten years ago, when I heard you get your prophecies. I knew that I would have three children following me who were all worthy to rule Orlath." Her gaze rose and lingered on his face.

Leroth nodded, though he wasn't sure what he was nodding about. A silent communication had seemed to pass between him and his mother, a message that he couldn't help but answer.

"Did Emmeldra fulfill her prophecy?" Annilda asked.

Leroth tightened his hold on her. "I don't know," he said quietly. "And I'm not looking right now."

His mother smiled understandingly. "If she didn't, then Pheron is to blame," she said. "Kill him."

Leroth kissed her cheek.

"There were a lot of things that I wanted to say. Always thought…there was tomorrow to say them. Tell Emmeldra I love her, and am proud of her. I love you, Leroth, and am proud of you as well." Leroth felt his tears flow the faster. "Hanir…"

She sighed. "Guard him, Leroth. Don't let him fall to the Dark. Guard him, my little one."

Leroth nodded, hardly able to see her face, so vividly did his eyes burn with tears.

"Is there a message that you want me to give Pheron?" he asked, not knowing why he spoke the words even as he spoke them. After all, she had already told him what message she wanted him to give to Pheron.

Annilda smiled a little. "When you strike the blow that avenges me, my son, I will be there and watching." She stretched up, and kissed him on the cheek in return. Then her eyes closed, and she was gone.

Leroth sat back with a wail of grief. He couldn't help it. She had been his mother. She had always been there. She was the paragon of goodness. She was the savior of Orlath for her generation, the woman who had withstood the loss of a sister and husband to the Dark, who had watched her children grow and endured the constant disappointment of having one of them lost to Destiny.

She was his *mother*.

He didn't feel twenty-two years old, in that moment. He felt as though he were a little child, and his governess were telling him, all over again, that his mother had come back wounded horribly from the last attack of the Dark and was not expected to survive. She had survived that time, and come back to him, and lifted him into the air, teasing him gently for worrying.

Not this time.

Someone's hand fell on his shoulder. Leroth looked up, blinking back tears, and saw one of the nobles standing there.

"My Lord Leroth?" he asked. "Is the Queen…dead?" His eyes went to the Queen lying motionless on the floor.

Leroth nodded. He couldn't have spoken if the noble had threatened to kill him for not answering with words.

The noble threw back his head with his own wail of grief. He drew the attention of everyone, save Hanir, who was standing by the lip of the cave and staring over it with a rigidity in his posture that told Leroth what had happened.

A murmur traveled the cave. The nobles nudged each other, pointing, paling, their eyes widening and gestures of genuine grief taking place.

Then their eyes fixed on him.

Leroth could see the speculation in them. They were wondering, even now, even in this moment, who would rule Orlath.

He wanted to scream at them. Couldn't they see that his mother was dead? How could they plot and think of the throne of Orlath at a time like this?

Then he calmed himself. No. This was the kind of mourning that would have pleased his mother. She would want people to be thinking of the future, and the Kingdom she had loved, and ruled. The Kingdom she had lost her life defending. Pheron had been trying to destroy the future of Orlath, and she had stood in his way, despite knowing what had happened to her sister.

Leroth felt tears flower in his eyes again. His mother was dead, and he had lost a sister. He should be mourning.

But before he could just yield himself to the grief, he would have to make where he stood perfectly plain.

He stood, and walked over to Hanir, who continued to look over the lip of the cave, not noticing him. Leroth coughed, and at last Hanir turned and stared at him with wild eyes. No, stared through him was more like it, Leroth thought.

"She's gone," Hanir whispered through numb lips.

He spoke of Emmeldra, Leroth knew, but the words could suit Annilda just as well. He bowed his head. "They both are," he said. "My brother, Queen Annilda is dead. Orlath is without a ruler."

Hanir just stood there, as if wondering why he should care about that at a time like this.

Leroth sighed, but tried to understand. His brother had lost a twin. In some ways, that was a closer grief than Leroth's own. It was widely whispered that the loss of her twin should have killed his mother.

He made the unmistakable gesture, because otherwise there was no way that his brother would understand his meaning, and there might be some stupid nobles who would deliberately mistake it.

He went to one knee, and stared up into Hanir's eyes, hearing the murmuring spring into being again—and die when he opened his mouth.

"Queen Annilda of Orlath is dead, and has passed to the Light," Leroth said. He paused, with tension high and singing in his ears. Then he bowed his head before his brother's stunned gaze and said, "King Hanir of Orlath lives, and reigns!"

That last word was more like a squeak than a cry, but others heard and took it up. Other nobles dropped to a knee, and there came a drawing of swords and laying them down. Anyone who had brought a weapon was laying it down on the floor, with a mighty clatter of steel. It was

the traditional yielding of weapons to a monarch, and a swearing of loyalty stronger than any oath, though of course that would come later.

Leroth had dreamed of such a salute coming to him, once.

No longer.

He stared into Hanir's eyes, and waited for the acknowledgment.

Slowly, his brother bent down and pressed his fingers against Leroth's forehead in blessing. Then he turned, and his voice rose and fell, breaking the breathless silence.

"My mother Annilda has passed to the Light," he said. "My sister Emmeldra is dead. My brother Pheron is a traitor. My brother Leroth has yielded to me." He turned his head, but Leroth didn't take the given opportunity to disagree. Hanir turned his head back to the nobles, and said, "I will rule Orlath."

The cheering drowned out the furious pounding of the waves below.

Leroth lowered his head and let the tears come.

Chapter Seventy
Stubbornness

"Stubbornness can accomplish quite a bit. Especially if you can manage to lean back and look cool and composed while you demand whatever it is that you want."

—Glangon, Traitor Prince of Rivendon.

"Let go, Pheron."

Pheron gasped and opened his eyes. The first thing that struck him was that he felt surprisingly good for having tumbled some hundreds of feet from a ledge. The water hadn't hit him as hard as it was supposed to do.

Of course, it didn't take him long to work out that this was because the water hadn't hit him at all. Or rather, it had decided to do it extremely gently. Pheron found himself leaning back in the embrace of a waterspout, cradled and held by the clear arms of an undine.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

Pheron opened his mouth, thought about the expressions on the face of his mother and Emmeldra, and said, "Why don't you ask me later?" He looked around. "Where's Emmeldra? And the Damned Spider?"

"Your friend will probably be annoyed that you didn't ask about it first," said the undine, low amusement in her voice as she nodded behind him. Pheron tried to turn in her grasp, and found that he could, the water going briefly solid as needed so that he could put his elbow and knees down on it. He gazed at the cliff and saw the Damned Spider hanging from the rock. It waves its legs frantically at him.

"It tried to catch you," said the undine. "Of course, the moment the wards broke, we were here and waiting, but it didn't know that." A cool hand brushed his shoulder briefly. "You gave us all quite a scare."

"I gave myself one," said Pheron, his memory now brushing unwillingly at the moments of

freefalling, before he had convinced himself that he was dead. "Where's Emmeldra?"

The undine nodded back in the opposite direction. Pheron turned again, and saw her in the grip of another waterspout.

"Not dead?" he asked.

"In a coma, as far as we can tell anything at all. I think it was all rather too much for her."

"Please, can I see her?"

"It would be best if you didn't." The undine's voice was gentle, but firm. "She'll be executed soon, after all."

Pheron narrowed his eyes. "Why do you say that?"

The undine gestured. This time, Pheron looked up. He saw Bloodsinger flying there, his back empty, his gaze fixed on the Princess who rested in the grip of the other undine.

"He wants to kill her for smashing his egg," said the undine who held him quietly. "One can hardly blame him for that. And now that you have brought her to despair, you have fulfilled your part of the bargain."

Pheron blinked. "Take me to him."

The undine blinked in turn. "As you will." Then she rose, with him in her arms. Pheron found himself lying back. Partially it was just to ease the aches and cramps in his muscles, but partially he had the idea that he wanted to meet Bloodsinger looking at his ease as much as possible.

The dragon circled down to meet them before they had risen very far, and stared just slightly past Pheron as he said, "You have done well. You have done much better than I expected. I could hear her. It was—very sweet." His tongue flickered, and he readjusted his gaze. "Our bargain is fulfilled, in part."

Pheron rolled his eyes at himself. He had forgotten, of course, that Bloodsinger couldn't really see him, and therefore it wouldn't much matter what he looked like. Well, hopefully he could smell at his ease, then. "And for the other part, I will go with you to the Kingdom of Arvenna."

"Good." Bloodsinger's gaze sheered towards Emmeldra. "Now, if you will forgive me a moment—"

"No."

Bloodsinger quivered. For that matter, the undine quivered. Pheron could feel the tremor of the one and see the other, and he heeded neither, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Bloodsinger. The dragon said quietly, "What?" as he turned his head back.

"You heard me." Pheron leaned forward, knowing that Bloodsinger would at least hear his voice moving closer, even if he couldn't see or smell him doing it. "It struck me just now that the terms of the bargain are very clear. I took Emmeldra's Destiny. And then I was to go with you to the Kingdom of Arvenna."

"That is correct."

"But what would you do?" asked Pheron. "What makes it a bargain? Are you going to give me something in turn, or am I merely bound to you in the simplest of ways, by your promise not to burn me to death?"

Bloodsinger trembled as if he were caught in the hold of the ocean, like Cloudshadow. "You owe me something," he said. "You took Cloudshadow's death from me."

"This bargain was made on top of that," said Pheron. "I took Emmeldra's Destiny, and fulfilled the first part. And I will go with you the Kingdom of Arvenna. The second part. But you promised me nothing in return. This is an inequality which I think needs to be addressed." He

was surprised to find that he was, in a sort of appalling way, having fun.

Bloodsinger showed his teeth. Pheron didn't move. Partially it was because he was sure that the undine would move him before Bloodsinger could burn him to death, but partially it was because he truly was not afraid. Not now. He had seen despair in his mother's eyes, and his sister had tried to commit suicide because of him. Fear could come back later.

"What would you?" growled Bloodsinger, in a tone that said he knew what Pheron wanted all too well.

"Spare Emmeldra's life," said Pheron.

"And give her back to Orlath?"

"Let her come to Arvenna with us," said Pheron carefully, enunciating each word. "I would heal her there, if I could."

"She smashed my egg."

Rage Pheron had not even known was hiding within him flared to life, like that white fire of Hanir's springing from the altar. "And you burned Corlinth!"

Bloodsinger flicked his tongue. "That is not a debt that I owe you."

"Then Emmeldra's death is not a debt that she owes you."

"I promised to help you."

"And she despaired." Pheron leaned forward again, almost out of the undine's grip, letting the rage turn into firmness at the back of his voice. It seemed the best idea right now. "Let it be enough, Bloodsinger. She despaired. Her life is gone from her, even if she stayed. She would only try to commit suicide again when she woke and found herself without a Destiny." He shook his head. "Let it be enough. All debts done, all bargains paid, save for what I owe you. Enough."

Bloodsinger was silent. He stared at Emmeldra again, and then said, "We would have named our dragonling a name that means Sunsoarer in your tongue."

Pheron smiled. "And there was a little boy named Carent who escaped the wreck of Corlinth. I climbed down a cliff with him on my back."

Bloodsinger said quietly, "Let it be enough."

Pheron closed his eyes and let his head fall back. "Thank you," he said simply.

"I thought something like this might happen," said Bloodsinger. "I am bound to you, susceptible to you." Pheron sat up again and found the golden eyes fixed unnervingly straight on him, as if Bloodsinger really could see him. "I don't know what it is. You manage to convince me against my will. But there is someone else with me, someone who has no compunction to listen to you. She will keep me from slipping too fully under your spell."

"If she harms Emmeldra—"

"She will not," said a new voice.

Pheron turned his head. What he had thought was a piece of stone crouched among the other rocks at the foot of the cliff stirred, and he saw a red dragon lift her head. He was sure that she was female, not only from Bloodsinger's speaking but because she had a delicacy of neck that he had seen only in Cloudshadow besides her. Her eyes shone a dazzling silver as she spread her wings and lifted from the rock, circling the undine's waterspout until she halted in front of him.

"My name is Flameflare," she said, staring just a little past him. "Bloodsinger's mate. Sunsoarer's mother who would have been. I am coming with you to Arvenna. My mate owes you something. I do not." She bared her teeth, and then turned her head slightly to the side, so that Pheron could see who rode her back. "And here are some more who will help keep you honest, I think."

Rangeforest smiled grimly at him. "Hello, Pheron. Going to Arvenna after all, I see?"

Pheron could only nod.

Haljen's face peered over her shoulder. "The armies of the Dark are gathering there," he said, sounding more confident than he had since they escaped from Jienna's home. "And you will be part of them."

Pheron only smiled this time. It was fine if they wanted to think that. He turned to look at Emmeldra. "Bloodsinger—"

"I will fetch your Spider," said Bloodsinger, and off he flew.

Flameflare turned her head back towards him. "You cannot fool me," she said. "You are very strange, and possibly very powerful, but if I decide that you should die, then you will die. How can you oppose me? You have no Destiny, no elemental magic."

Pheron bowed his head. "As you say, my lady."

Flameflare sneered at him and flew higher, hovering as she waited for her mate.

Pheron heard the undine snickering, a moment before he had to conceal his own laughter. He looked back and met the clear blue eyes. The cool hand touched his shoulder for a moment.

"It is not over yet," said the undine.

"That I know."

"But it is well begun." The undine glanced at Emmeldra's body in the hold of her companion. "You are our ally, Pheron, and a very valuable one. We will look for you in Arvenna."

Pheron watched Bloodsinger wheel towards him, the Damned Spider clinging firmly to his back. "I will be there."

* * *

Pheron adjusted himself as well as he could. It wasn't easy to hold onto Emmeldra with just one arm, and to make it worse, the Damned Spider was trying to crowd up beside him, as if afraid that he would vanish again, did it not cling to him with all its might.

"Get behind me," Pheron had to say at last.

The Damned Spider made a sulky, chattering sound, and at last consented.

Pheron looked over to the side. Flameflare flew there, a little behind and above her mate, wings flapping heavily. Haljen was looking forward, to the north where they flew, his face pale in the starlight. Rangeforest was staring at Pheron instead, and her smile was not nice.

Pheron glanced down at his unconscious sister, and sighed. This wasn't the cleverest idea in the world.

But he would do it if he could. He would heal her. He owed her that much.

The Damned Spider's legs tightened around his waist, as if it had heard his thoughts. Pheron smiled, knowing the Spider would sense it, and then looked ahead, like Haljen.

Better than looking behind.

Or thinking about his full bladder.

Chapter Seventy-One
The Stubbornness of New Kings

"All that has begun,
All that has ended,
Has passed under sun
And has Light befriended."
—Hymn of the Rennon Heretics.

"Your Majesty?"

Hanir turned. The noble before him, bowing nervously as if unsure how deep he should make the gesture, was a familiar one, Lord Syanne of his mother's Council. "Yes, my lord?"

"We found someone who may have had to do with Pheron's gaining access to the cave, my lord."

"Bring him."

Lord Syanne looked as if he would have liked to say something, but snapped his mouth shut and scuttled out of the room in the face of Hanir's glare.

Hanir circled the desk at a slow pace, as he had been doing for most of the hours since sunrise. His mother's body had been brought back with all proper honors and was now being mourned in the temple of Elle. He should be there himself, he knew, if Leroth had taken the crown.

But instead Leroth was there. And he was here.

Hanir shook his head. Of course he had thought about ruling Orlath. He was one of his mother's heirs, her legitimate ones. Of course he could think about it. It was what he had trained for. And his mother had as good as told him that she was proclaiming him Heir, had done it, had signed it into law. The Council had showed him the signed and sealed proof of her will.

But this suddenly…

Hanir had accepted that he would rule sometime in the distant future, if at all. His mother was in good health. He could have passed the rule onto a child, Annilda's grandson or granddaughter, with no trouble at all.

A child? Whose? Jienna's or Joydancer's?

Hanir bowed his head. Grief was washing over him in such waves that he didn't know where one began and one ended. Jienna was there, smiling at him as the woman he loved instead of the aunt she became, and his mother was there, brave and defiant and trying to protect the future of Orlath.

And Emmeldra…

Hanir could feel a blankness in his mind where his twin should be. He had seen her and Pheron fall into the sea, and the sea seem to cradle them with gentle arms. But they had gone out of sight of the shore, and while he had seen Pheron still alive, he wasn't sure if there was life still in Emmeldra's motionless body or not. It was easier to think that there was not. He had seen the madness in her eyes when he finally woke from the spell of the fire. She was gone, even if she was still alive, and she would never again be the sister he had known.

Lover. Mother. Sister. All dead.

Hanir wished he could find comfort in mourning and in Elle, as it was so obvious that Leroth did. But he had to be King of Orlath, and that meant he had to take duty's cold comfort. There was only one source of hot comfort left to him, one thing burning in him that shone like the light of day.

Hatred of Pheron.

Traitor was too kind a word for him.

Hanir paused, his head tilted to the side as an idea came to him. The voice that spoke in his head was very like the one that had proclaimed Pheron's innocence in the matter of Jienna's death. It heartened Hanir, to know that even his rebellious thoughts were now turned in the direction of punishing his evil brother.

Traitor is in truth too kind a word. There are other words that you could use, and you know them.

Hanir took a deep breath, and nodded. Yes. This would blend the comfort of duty, and the comfort of hatred, and somewhere between them both he would find peace. He could do this.

He sat down at the desk, and began to write. Quill and parchment and ink were to hand, and the words sped easily across the paper. It was as if he had been intending to write it all along. Perhaps Destiny had helped him, and the voice had been the voice of Destiny. Hanir felt his tense shoulders relaxing as he wrote. That was an explanation that he could live with, at least.

Someone tapped on the door just as he finished, and scattered sand across the ink to dry the words. Hanir stood up. "Come."

Lord Syanne came in, actually manhandling a priestess of Elle. Hanir blinked. A priestess had helped Pheron enter the cave?

The priestess fell to one knee, managing the trick deftly even with her robe. "Prince Hanir," she said.

Lord Syanne kicked her in the back.

"King Hanir," she said. "Your Majesty."

"You helped Pheron into the cave?" Hanir asked. "Why?"

"He convinced me that he was a Darkworker who wanted help." The woman stared at the ground. "He wanted to repent, and he did pray in the temple of Elle all night. I thought that he was sincere, and so I told him to join the procession in my place." Her words were dull, as if she herself could hardly believe what she had done.

"What was your name?"

The woman's eyes rose to his face, and Hanir saw ill-concealed fear in them. She knew what it meant that he spoke as he had. "Gemma," she said.

"Gemma." Hanir walked around the desk and knelt beside her, ignoring the Lord Syanne's protesting movement. "You can't possibly believe that you told me everything. There must be more. Someone true to the Light would not have let a Darkworker like Pheron just walk past her unchallenged. Did he use magic?"

"No."

Hanir sighed. Of course, if she had cooperated, he could have made her fate a bit more merciful, but there was a secret joy to doing it this way. "You just believed his story?"

"Yes."

"Was the robe he used yours?"

"No, my lord." Gemma did not stammer, but her eyes blazed her fear openly now. "It was one he stole. Only later did we find the priestess he wrapped up in spidersilk."

"That's something," said Hanir. He sat back on his heels. "Do you know what we do to traitors, Gemma?"

Gemma made an awful sound. Hanir looked up at Lord Syanne, and found the man nodding solemnly. Of course, at the moment any member of the Council would nod solemnly at anything that Hanir suggested. They wanted to get on the new King's good side.

"I'm not a traitor," Gemma whispered passionately. "I'm not."

"Then we shall just have to add torture, to make sure that you give us a full confession." Hanir shook his head and stood. "Really, you should have just told the truth right out." He nodded to Lord Syanne. "Get her out of my sight, and rouse the torturers. They will have three days to do the best they can with her. Her execution will be a traitor's death, three days hence, at dawn."

Lord Syanne bowed, and escorted the babbling Gemma out of the room.

Hanir turned back and studied the proclamation he had written. The ink was almost dry. Soon he could read it aloud, and then some of the hatred burning in his heart could be eased.

"Pheron," he whispered. "I will see you again, unbrother of mine, and I will be more terrible than vengeance."

* * *

The nobles gathered with the servants in the courtyard as Hanir strode out on the balcony. He had allowed a few hours for word of the decree to run, and now it was almost noon. The sun blazed overhead, pinned to the sky like a medal. It was the hour of highest Light.

Only appropriate.

Leroth joined him on the balcony, staring at him curiously from the corner of one eye. Hanir ignored him. His brother could speak his piece when Hanir was done. For now, he was as ignorant of what the proclamation actually said as anyone.

Hanir stood silently for a few moments, letting his eyes run over the crowd. Who wasn't true? Who were the Darkworker spies in the courtyard?

Well, he hoped they would hear this, and carry it back to Pheron's ears. Let him know the truth about himself.

Hanir unrolled the scroll. This was for show, though. He knew the words. They had burned themselves on his heart even as he wrote them.

"Know that from this day forward there is no such person as Pheron of Orlath," he said, his voice harsh and clear as a trumpet. "I declare him worse than traitor. I declare him anathema. If he again sets foot on Orlathian soil, then let the Cycle itself rise up against him. Let no food from this land feed him. Let no wind from this land blow cool air in his face. May the Lilitha Ocean never bathe him again. May the Scarlet that burns within me burn him to ashes."

He bowed his head, hearing the dead stillness, more telling than any shocked murmurs. It was a century since anyone had been declared anathema, and even then it was revoked in the end, before any real harm could be done.

Could they hear, from his voice, that he did not intend to revoke this decree?

Hanir hoped so.

He prayed aloud, so they could all hear it, and those who wished to join him could join him. "Elle, you hear all our prayers. Mother of the World, you hear us. Forgiver of All Wrongs, you hear us. Fair One, you hear us. Huntress, you hear us."

There were more aspects, but four of them, one for each element, would do for the prayer

he intended to speak.

"He who once wore the name of Pheron of Orlath is anathema to Orlath," said Hanir. "May you damn him as well, Fair One. May he flee the sound of your voice, be pierced by your arrows, find no sanctuary from your fierce light, feel no motherhood from your breast again, and find no forgiveness of his wrongs."

Now there was murmuring. But Hanir continued right on, and they quieted as they saw he wasn't finished.

"May you not receive him when he dies. May his spirit go into blackness, complete and absolute and unending – the blackness reserved for the damned and the soul-stricken and the Dark."

Hanir unsheathed Ulua, and held it high, so that everyone could see the flames that flickered along its edges. "Anyone found helping the anathema Pheron will die," he said quietly. "The death reserved for traitors."

Everyone bowed their heads. Except for one. Hanir turned his head and found Leroth staring at him with a horrified expression.

"Did you have something to say, brother mine?"

Leroth only bowed his head. His hands on the balcony's railing clenched white at the knuckles, but he said nothing.

"Good," said Hanir, and turned back to the courtyard.

"You have heard me," he said. "From now on, no one shall speak of Pheron of Orlath, but only of the enemy of Orlath. No one shall aid him. He is not a Prince of Orlath, and never was.

"He is not my brother."

He cast the words fiercely into the air, and hoped that Pheron, wherever he was, would hear him.

Then he looked back down at his audience.

"There are other matters to attend to," Hanir said more calmly. "The war with the Dark begins. I know that my mother gave orders that villages harboring Darkworkers be burned. I commend those orders, and issue more. Anyone found to be working with the Dark will die a traitor's death. Anyone who harbors a creature of the Dark will die bound face-to-face with the creature on a pyre. Anyone who speaks against the Light will be jailed. Are there any questions?"

There were none. Hanir lifted his eyes to the sun, and smiled a little. They saw the necessity of this, even as he did.

Let the war begin.

And wherever you are, Pheron, may you live, so that you will come back and feel my anger rip you apart.

The End

(This story will continue in Part Two: The Light, the Dark, and the Uninterested.)

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